Suicide Century

Literature and Suicide from James Joyce to David Foster Wallace

Andrew Bennett

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Suicide Century investigates suicide as a prominent theme in twentieth-century and contemporary literature. Andrew Bennett argues that, with the waning of religious and legal prohibitions on suicide in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the increasing influence of medical and sociological accounts of its causes and significance in the twentieth century, literature responds to the act and idea as an increasingly normalised but incessantly baffling phenomenon. Discussing works by a number of major authors from the long twentieth century, the book explores the way that suicide makes and unmakes subjects, assumes and disrupts meaning, induces and resists empathy, and insists on and makes inconceivable our understanding of ourselves and of others.

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CHAPTER 1

Literature and Suicide

This book is as much about the living as it is about the dead, about hope as well as despair, about the future as well as the past. And it is about how we can make sense of our lives and how we can be certain of doing no such thing. In other words, the book is about the devastation and human disaster of suicide and about how literature records, configures, and imagines survivors' responses to such deaths. But it is also about the cognitive impulse to imagine one's own suicide as peculiarly and pervasively human. A work of literary suicidology, this book concerns twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature and how it represents what can be considered the ultimate assertion of selfhood just at the point of its decisive end. Given the prevalence of suicide ideation and suicide events both within and beyond the contemporary literary canon, I will argue, it is remarkable that critics have paid suicide so little attention. I seek to address this notable scholarly lacuna by exploring key literary texts of the last one hundred years as exemplary of a consistent but varied configuration of a critical concern in human affairs.

We are all touched by suicide: everyone alive is, in effect, a suicide survivor. More than 800,000 people take their own lives each year worldwide – more than 6,000 in the United Kingdom, approximately 40,000 in the United States.[1] While this may only equate to between one and three individuals per ten thousand in the general population each year,[2] many more are closely affected by the act and indeed by the thought: estimates vary wildly, but probably more than ten times as many people actively attempt to kill themselves, and empirical surveys estimate the number of people with suicidal thoughts at some point in their lives at anywhere between 10 and 63 per cent.[3] In his 1951 introduction to the English translation of Émile Durkheim's classic sociological study of suicide from 1897, George Simpson suggests that 'every individual has what we may call a suicide-potential', while writing in 1972 the suicide theorist Jacques Choron goes on to claim that 'practically everyone at one time or another has toyed with

the idea of killing himself'.[4] In this sense, being a suicide survivor is not just a question of living on after the death of another person but also of living with suicide as a 'permanent possibility' for oneself as much as for others.[5] This book addresses the thought that the potential for suicide can be considered part of what it means to be human: only *Homo sapiens* are known knowingly to kill themselves, and we are all suicide survivors in the sense that no one alive has yet undertaken the act for which almost all are uniquely equipped. And yet this book is also about suicide as a source of affective sustenance, even of optimism – as a way of getting on, rather than getting out (you get on by thinking of getting out, holding the option open as a way of escaping it). And it is about the unique and varied ways in which twentieth-century literature engages with the terrible, necessary human possibility and actuality of suicide.

A 'death like no other'

Suicide Century investigates literature as the space in which suicide can be conceptualized and imagined, actualized, promoted, and resisted. It focuses on the constitutive ambivalence of the act and on its fundamental epistemic obscurity – on suicide as a profound, unfathomable denial, destruction, or negation of the self, and simultaneously as an ultimate assertion of identity and agency.[6] Against the 'normatively monolithic' contemporary conception of suicide in the West as primarily a question of mental health, the book responds to literature's wider, more complex, and, I would argue, more sophisticated conception of suicide as (also) in some cases an active decision and a permanent, if not universal, human possibility.[7] Indeed, suicide can even be seen as an 'exceptional affirmation', as Maurice Blanchot puts it, while still an act governed by 'illogical optimism'.[8] In this respect, suicide may even be conceived of as a singular political act, as a 'form of resistance' to authority but one that, in destroying the agent of that resistance, paradoxically 'serves power'.[9] In Michel Foucault's terms, suicide operates 'at the borders and in the interstices of power that [is] exercised over life'.[10] As Kelly McGuire argues in a study of suicide and gender in the eighteenth century, the question of agency in suicide is particularly pronounced for women, for whom it is already a vexed ideological question.[11] While suicide is often held to be a particularly heinous act because it contradicts nature, for the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte this characteristic precisely marks its 'superiority': even though suicide is ultimately 'cowardly', the 'resolve to die', Fichte remarks in *The Science of Ethics as Based on the Science of Knowledge* (1798), 'is the purest

representation of the superiority of thought over nature'.[12] This idea is echoed, in some ways, by Antonin Artaud when he declares in 1925 that suicide can be seen to be a means of 'reconquering myself' and of 'anticipating the unpredictable approaches of God'; for Artaud, suicide will allow one to 'reintroduce my design in nature' and to 'give things the shape of my will'; it will allow me to 'free myself from the conditioned reflexes of my organs'. And yet there remains the lurking suspicion that this 'freedom' to kill oneself is itself a function of one's 'irreducibly predetermined being'.[13] In either case, since suicide is a peculiarly human action, one is confronted by the question of meaning – of what, and indeed of whether, suicide means: 'What are human beings doing when they end their own lives?' Jean Baechler asks.[14]

Suicide, 'a death like no other', is fundamentally ambivalent and may be considered an instance of the profound and multifaceted undecidability by which literature is itself constituted.[15] Literature, I will argue, engages with the ways in which suicide, as a 'uniquely resonant strand in human behaviour',[16] makes and unmakes subjects, induces and resists empathy, and insists on and makes inconceivable our understanding of ourselves and of others. Suicide, 'one of the most enigmatic' of human behaviours, is, according to Baechler, 'strictly unintelligible' in the individual case, even while it 'cries out for interpretation'.[17] Suicide is an 'uncanny fulcrum', as the critic Anne Nesbet puts it, between '"meaningful" life and "meaningless" death', both a triumph over and a surrender to death.[18] Above all, suicide makes and unmakes meaning. If, as Ross Chambers contends, there is 'no such thing as suicide by accident', then every act of suicide would therefore imply its own unique 'significance'; and yet while the suicide endows himself with 'immense' 'discursive authority' through his action, he 'simultaneously and irrevocably' loses control of the act's meanings.[19] In this sense, the suicide becomes 'other' to our sense of what it means to be a subject or individual, to have or to be a self. Nothing makes others more 'other to us' than their suicide, Adam Phillips argues, since the act makes those others 'both more and less the authors of their own lives'.[20]

Although definitions of suicide are contested and historically and culturally variable, in this book I propose to appeal to what I term the 'canonical' conception of suicide (one to which it is possible that no act has ever entirely or purely adhered) as a gathering of five key characteristics: the act is willed or intended; it exclusively involves the deaths of one or more individuals who have independently (even if in cooperation) made the decision to die; it is undertaken by an individual or individuals

who can be said to have at least a minimal agency; it involves a certain temporality (it occurs within a limited period of time); and it involves a death that, at the moment it occurs, is otherwise avoidable.[21] The point of such a conception is not to rule out other forms of self-killing, including broad categories such as martyrdom, suicide bombing, mass suicide, and euthanasia; other methods, such as long-term addiction, self-starvation and other eating disorders, high-risk behaviour (including extreme sports), and heroic but life-threatening actions; and other mental states, such as intoxication, insanity, and (alleged) demonic possession – since, as I say, it is possible that no act of suicide strictly adheres exclusively to these criteria. Nor indeed is it to overlook the ways in which suicide and suicidal behaviour merge into what Durkheim calls 'other forms of conduct', including such 'embryonic' forms of suicide as 'the scholar who dies from excessive devotion to study' (suicides 'do not form . . . an isolated class of monstrous phenomena', as Durkheim puts it).[22] Rather, it is to try to construct a baseline against which the act of self-killing might be measured. Nevertheless, this limited conception of 'canonical' suicide is the version to which many of the instances discussed in this book refer, and may be said, in addition, to have the authority not only of the philosopher Immanuel Kant ('What constitutes suicide is the intention to destroy oneself') but also of the general or folk sense of suicide underlying what *Chambers Dictionary* refers to simply as 'the act or an instance of killing oneself deliberately'.[23]

In this book, I will suggest that it is imaginative literature – rather than philosophy, theology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, sociology, anthropology, epidemiology, or indeed suicidology itself – that most fully, most consistently, and indeed most rigorously explores the phenomenon, and in particular the phenomenology, the lived experience, so to speak, of suicide.[24] Germaine de Staël asserts in her *Reflections on Suicide* (1812) that suicide involves 'the whole moral organization of man', and the historian Marzio Barbaglio argues that, 'More perhaps than any other action, suicide depends on a vast number of psychosocial, cultural, political and even biological causes'.[25] Literature – modern literature in particular – allows for an investigation not just of ethical and religious questions of suicide nor simply of its economic, sociological, psychological, medical, and psychiatric causes and legal and social consequences but also, most profoundly, of what the act means for the subject and for his or her survivors – what it is like, what is involved in contemplating or deciding to kill yourself: *how* it is. Literature potentially offers us a sense of what the Holocaust survivor, writer, and eventual suicide Jean Améry calls the '*condition suicidaire*'.[26]

This book starts from the premise that literature is a meaning-making discourse or, more accurately, that literature enacts the endless processes by which meanings are made, that it *requires* meaning-making, even while it resists and refracts any final or definite achievement of it. As such, I will argue, literature is eminently the discourse that allows for an exploration of suicide just to the extent that suicide may be considered as an act that both asserts and at the same time fundamentally withholds meaning: it insists on the shaping of a life, but still eradicates purpose from that life. Answering the question 'Is suicide a solution' in *La Révolution Surréaliste* in 1925, Paul Valéry comments evocatively on the 'precariousness of the distinctions and contrasts we try to make among perceptions, tendencies, impulses, and consequences of impulses – between making happen and letting happen, between acting and undergoing – between *willing* and being capable' in relation to suicide: 'Seen under the microscope, the thread spun and measured out for us by the Fates is a cable whose multicolored strands cross over and under and reappear in the evolving twist that holds them and carries them on'.[27] It is literature, we might say, that most carefully registers the multicoloured evolving twists of such threads.

Literary Suicide

From Dante's forest of suicides and Chaucer's legends of good women in the fourteenth century to novels by Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Emily Brontë, Hardy, and Henry James in the nineteenth century, representations of suicide are prominent in and critically important to the pre-twentieth-century European literary canon. In earlier traditions, where suicide is not simply dismissed or condemned as a sin, crime, or act of insanity, it is often glorified as heroic or as the act of a tragic if flawed hero, lover, artist, or thinker. Suicide in fact plays a crucial but historically varied role in the pre-twentieth-century literary canon, but seems to have been particularly important in the early modern period. In his wide-ranging survey of the cultural history of suicide in Europe up until the end of the eighteenth century, Georges Minois comments that the act was 'a nearly obligatory ingredient of tragedy in England in the years 1580–1620', and in his world history of suicide, Marzio Barbagli reports an 'exponential' increase in plays featuring suicides from just eight in the six decades leading to 1560 to as many as ninety-nine in the first quarter of the seventeenth century – marking a developing sense that suicide is a function of human choice, rather than diabolic possession, and also registering a new 'sensibility' that brings the act out of the shadows and into the permissive space of Elizabethan

theatre.[28] One critic counted fifty-two suicides in Shakespeare's plays alone – including *Julius Caesar* (Cassius, Brutus, and Portia), *Antony and Cleopatra* (Mark Antony, Cleopatra), *Romeo and Juliet* (both of them), *King Lear* (Goneril kills herself; the blinded Gloucester is deceived into attempting to throw himself from a cliff), *Macbeth* (Lady Macbeth directly and her husband indirectly – a form of suicide-by-cop), and *Timon of Athens* (in the death of the eponymous nihilistic and misanthropic antihero).[29] It is notable, indeed, that Shakespeare's most famous play revolves around the actual suicide of Ophelia and the contemplation of the act by the protagonist himself. And it is notable too that what must be English literature's single most quoted line – Hamlet's self-tormenting question, 'To be or not to be'[30] – presents a character contemplating killing himself (despite frequent denials by critics from Samuel Johnson to Harold Bloom, this is surely the only way that the line can reasonably be construed: if that is the question, then 'not to be' can only entail killing oneself).[31] In this sense, *Hamlet* might be understood to be structured around the *philosophical* question of suicide – the question that, according to the nineteenth-century German Romantic writer Novalis constitutes the real beginning of philosophy, the 'genuine philosophical act', and according to the French existentialist writer Albert Camus the one 'genuine philosophical problem'.[32]

Shakespeare's play involves Ophelia's actual suicide, to be sure, but it also revolves around suicide as a question – as, indeed, the unavoidable question. Even while Hamlet's first soliloquy notes God's 'canon 'gainst self-slaughter' (1.ii.132), even while he decides against killing himself in his more famous second soliloquy (in this way, he concludes, 'conscience' or consciousness itself 'does make cowards' (3.i.82)), and even while the play ends with Hamlet's plea to his friend Horatio not to take *his* life, at least not immediately – one reading of 'Absent thee from felicity awhile' (5.ii.340) – the play and, to an extent, English literature thereafter are haunted by the suicidality of its protagonist. This is why Horatio is right to fear from the start that the ghost might tempt Hamlet 'toward the flood' or to 'the dreadful summit of the cliff / That beetles o'er his base into the sea' – that it might put 'toys of desperation' into his brain (1.iv.69–76). Hamlet, that tortured, self-tormenting everyman is, from the beginning to the end of the play, suicidal.

Summing up three or four decades of statistical work on suicide, Émile Durkheim insists that 'there is always and normally, in every society, a collective disposition taking the form of suicide' and that suicide is a 'chronic' and 'normal element of the moral temper' of society.[33] It is from a recognition of the centrality of suicide in the English literary canon and its

sociologisation and normalisation in the twentieth century that the present book begins. I set out from the premise that, in diverse ways and in response to highly variable, historically specific contexts, literature provides a space in which the inadmissible – in this case suicide as itself a *defining* human possibility – can be discussed, elaborated, challenged, effectively imagined, and vicariously enacted. If the thought of suicide is, in part, an antidote to the struggle of life itself, a survival mechanism, even a way to avoid dying (you imagine doing yourself in in order not to), literary representations of suicide are bound up with the more general ambiguity of, or the ambivalence involved in, suicide ideation – a cognitive habit or tendency or event in which the *thought* can function not only as a prompt towards or a rehearsal for but also as a defence against the act. For one thing we know about suicide is that ambivalence is built into the act: 'The majority of suicidal patients are ambivalent to the very end', the World Health Organization reports; ambivalence 'saturates the suicidal act', Kay Redfield Jamison comments.[34] The point is made dramatically clear in the comments of one of the subjects of Eric Steel's remarkable documentary film *The Bridge* (2006). Kevin Hines reports regretting the jump after launching himself from the eponymous Golden Gate Bridge – changing his mind, in effect, halfway down – and deciding that he wants to live, after all. He explains that in the remaining moments of his fall, he arranged his body so as to minimize injury as he hit the water. He was injured but survived, a living testament to a fundamental problem in suicidology, the question of intention – a crucial aspect of any definition of suicide but one that can always change, at any moment, right up to and indeed beyond the literal point of no return.

Representations of suicide in literature reflect not only personal or psychological but also social and cultural aspects of ambivalence towards the act. And this ambivalence may also be understood to reflect, fundamentally, the institution of literature more generally: its status as socially and psychologically affirmative and redemptive, on the one hand, and as a discourse or practice that undermines and disturbs personal, social, and cultural certainties, formations, and identities on the other. We might say that literature makes living, continuing to live, possible, but that at the same time – and therefore – it questions how and why one might do so. In this book, I want to take that thought seriously and, through a discussion of modern fiction and poetry, to consider literature as the preeminent discourse of suicide ideation, the discourse in which suicide can be more or less openly thought, conceived, challenged, imagined, planned, practiced, performed – and avoided.[35]

The Ideation Pharmakon

The starting point for this book, then, is the proposition that the human propensity for suicide ideation in the weak sense (the general and not necessarily, in the end, suicidal sense) helps to explain the otherwise curious and seemingly transhistorical insistence on the representation, contemplation, and imaginative envisioning of suicide in the literary canon.[36] At least since Hamlet's famous soliloquy, suicide has played a central if mostly unacknowledged role in the institution of literature. But with the gradual relaxation of religious and legal restrictions on suicide, its increasing medicalisation and pathologisation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the sociologisation and normalisation of the act in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, suicide becomes an increasingly prominent concern in canonical literature – from the suicides that punctuate each of James Joyce's major texts, Virginia Woolf's prefiguring of her own suicide in 1941 in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *The Waves* (1931), and a focus on the act in writers such as Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, D. H. Lawrence, Elizabeth Bowen, and William Faulkner towards the beginning of the century; through the death-driven poetry of Stevie Smith and 'extremist' suicidalities of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, and others in the 1950s and 1960s; to what is, if anything, an even more pervasive concern with the act and idea in novels such as Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998), David Vann's *Legend of a Suicide* (2008), and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) and *The Pale King* (2011) at the end of the century and the beginning of our own. This book begins, then, from the fundamental recognition that suicide is an essential, irreducible, and conceptually, thematically, and formally significant, if potentially scandalous or transgressive, feature of the modern literary canon.

While the book is informed by the historical phenomenon of suicide and suicide ideation – by the rich historical, sociological, and epidemiological data on suicide, for example, and by the actual suicides of writers – it also, and more centrally, focuses on literary representations of suicide as important cultural dimensions of suicide ideation. Despite appearances, I want to suggest that the thought of suicide – suicide *as* a thought – can be conceived not only as negation but also as affirmation – an affirmation, even, of life. For many, the thought of suicide, the knowledge that there is a way out, is itself life affirming, even lifesaving (you do not need to kill yourself because you know that you can kill yourself). For suicide to be a possibility, and therefore for the act to be affirmative, life-affirming,

to be constitutive of hope – to *save* lives as well as to end them – suicide must be thought, imagined, conceived, planned. And it must be possible to think, imagine, conceive, plan it, again and again – for suicide to be 'real' and therefore potentially able to save one's life, it must be embraced by the individual as a practical possibility, as an act that might indeed be undertaken. What psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and others refer to as 'suicide ideation', in other words, is not only fundamental to the individual who intends or carries out the act: rather, suicide ideation may be conceived of as an inevitable, even as a necessary aspect of what it means to be human. Suicidality is constitutive of the human condition if it can be taken to include thinking about, contemplating, and imagining the possibility of ending one's life.

Suicide Century, then, seeks to investigate and to understand the under-recognized fact of the prevalence of suicide as a key concern of twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature. A preliminary account of its argument might briefly be sketched in the following terms: suicide ideation is fundamental to those medical, therapeutic, psychiatric, psychoanalytic, and social work discourses and practices concerned with suicide or with suicidal subjects or individuals. In this context, suicide ideation can be conceived of in terms of a person's thoughts about and plans for killing him- or herself. When engaged in with a certain frequency or in certain ways, suicide ideation tends to be interpreted, along with other tendencies, thought and speech patterns, behaviours, and dispositions, as a key indicator of a propensity towards or likelihood of a suicide attempt. But suicide ideation might also be seen in fact as a far more general psychological state, reflex, habit, or tendency. Indeed, it might be seen as a human characteristic, a peculiarly human attribute that in some way plays a part in defining what it means to be human. It is something of a truism in certain strands of philosophical thinking to say that to be human involves the ability to think the future, a thinking that necessarily includes the knowledge of one's ultimate, unavoidable death. 'Nor dread nor hope afford / A dying animal', W. B. Yeats avers in his twelve-line poem 'Death' from *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933) – unless, that is, the dying animal is human: for 'man', he contends, 'knows death to the bone', has 'created death' indeed, and 'awaits his end / Dreading and hoping all'.[37] Despite what many would no doubt think of as the tragedy of this singularly human knowledge, it becomes possible to argue that there is a human need also (and therefore) to imagine *choosing* to die, since the thought of the future must include the possibility that one's life will at some point become psychologically or physically intolerable and that one will therefore be forced – or

decide – to end one's life. Indeed, the thought of the future as such – which must logically include the thought of a future state that is intolerable – may itself be said to be intolerable in the absence of the thought that one could at some point choose to end one's life: in a sense it might be said that thinking the future is neither logically nor affectively possible without the thought of an escape. Or one might put it differently: to think of the future is necessarily to include the possibility not just that the individual who is doing the thinking might be absent, radically and permanently absent (in other words no longer alive) but also that such absence could be a result of the thinker's own actions. Suicide, in this sense, is structural to the condition of humanity, to being human, inasmuch as being human involves a) thinking, b) a thinking of the future, and c) a thinking of a future in which, in a fundamental sense, one will not be present.

It is no doubt for this reason that Friedrich Nietzsche declares in *Beyond Good and Evil* that the thought of suicide is 'a powerful solace' and that 'by means of it one gets through many a bad night'.[38] Influenced, like Nietzsche, by the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, Richard Wagner similarly remarked in a letter to Liszt in 1845 of his 'ardent longing for death, for absolute unconsciousness, total non-existence'.[39] And some thinkers have even conceived of suicide ideation as affirmative since, as Montaigne argued as early as 1573–4 in 'A Custom of the Isle of Cea', 'Living is slavery if the freedom to die is wanting'.[40] 'One doesn't kill oneself', Maurice Blanchot declares in *The Space of Literature*, 'but one can'. This, he contends, 'is a marvelous resource'. To be able to die – having death 'within reach, docile and reliable', as Blanchot puts it – may even be said to 'make life possible'.[41] The Romanian French philosopher E. M. Cioran is perhaps the most outspoken of twentieth-century writers in his assertion of the benefit of at least the *idea* of suicide, of suicide ideation: in *A Short History of Decay* (1949), he declares that we are '[b]orn in a prison' and that we 'could not reach the end of a single day if the possibilities of ending it all did not incite us to begin the next day all over again'. For Cioran, the 'prison' of the world 'strips us of everything, except the freedom to kill ourselves'.[42] The thought, the very thought of suicide, this 'consolation', this 'gift' that 'fill[s] us with dread' but also 'delights' us, *is* freedom, our only freedom. Like Montaigne, Cioran asserts that the individual who has *not* imagined his own suicide is nothing more than 'a degraded galley slave or a worm crawling upon the cosmic carrion'.[43] Even though Cioran does not in the end recommend suicide (since it anyway always comes 'too late', as he aphoristically asserts in *The Trouble with Being Born*), he nevertheless sees it as constituting what the sociologist Thomas Osborne describes as an

'exercise in the aesthetics of freedom'.[44] As Margaret Pabst Battin argues, for certain suicides, at least, the act involves the preservation of a certain identity, a 'self-preservation' and 'a kind of self-respect', a 'conception of one's value and worth, beneath which one is not willing to slip'.[45] By this reading, suicide can even be what Simon Critchley calls a 'fantasy of total affirmation'.[46]

Suicide ideation in its technical or medical sense is, as clinicians recognize, often employed as a substitute for the act of suicide. In this regard, it is a strategy of thinking that individuals use (as Montaigne, Nietzsche, Blanchot, and Cioran recommend) to make bearable the prospect of continuing to live. And yet the consolatory, redemptive quality of suicide ideation is also, of course, potentially deadly, since it is also on account of the fact that the thought must be 'real' that, for some, it must be actualized, enacted. The thought leads to the act, makes it possible. It is the thought of its enactment that gives it power as a possibility. Suicide ideation, therefore, is a simulacrum, a dangerous if also potentially redemptive representation. In other words, one of the fundamentally ambiguous or undecidable dimensions of suicide is the fact that suicide ideation is a 'pharmakon' – at once curative and itself (part of) the sickness that it attempts to cure (since its ideation always, by definition, precedes the act of suicide). Literature in this sense is at least ambiguously curative, redemptive. It offers a space in which suicide can be thought, where it can be imagined, even when it cannot be imagined elsewhere. This is part of the risk of literature, its danger, and its threat, as well as its promise. And the present study is founded on the assumption that the social or ethical or redemptive power of literature is always in question, that the cure or redemption – religious, political, or personal – is always resisted by literature even as it explores and describes its impulses and effects.

The 'death that one gives oneself sovereignly'

By taking one's life, Jean Baechler argues, the individual 'proclaims his autonomy and sovereignty' over that life; the suicide individual 'decides for itself in its full sovereignty', Améry declares; for Anthony Giddens, the act often involves a 'grasping toward omnipotence'.[47] As such, suicide can be considered constitutively subversive since it 'affirms freedom, dignity, and the right to happiness' in a way that contests, in an absolute sense, the rights of others and of institutions over the individual.[48] Suicide therefore articulates the paradox (and impossibility) of Western liberalism: the absolute right and the absolute scandal of individualism itself. Suicide

fundamentally and irrevocably involves duplicity, undecidability, and ambivalence: it is both an act of agency, of 'will', a self-assertion and, at the same time, an act of self-abnegation, annihilation.[49] This, according to Critchley, constitutes the 'contradiction at the heart of suicide', which is both the expression of 'my ownmost possibility' and, at the same time, 'the moment when the "I" and its possibilities disappear'.[50] Glossing Blanchot, Critchley argues that suicide has the same paradoxicality as insomnia, since both are expressions of the will to negate the will: while the insomniac 'cannot will him or herself to sleep because sleep is not an exercise of the will', suicide in turn is a 'fantasy of total affirmation, an ecstatic assertion of the absolute freedom of the Subject in its union with nature or the divine'. In this sense, at the moment of suicide the Subject paradoxically 'swells to fill the entire cosmos' such that 'the death of the self confirms its deathlessness'.[51] Antonin Artaud makes similar points in two short pieces on suicide, both from 1925: in one, he comments that what he calls 'suicide proper' is 'incomprehensible' to him.[52] In the other, he declares that if he is to commit suicide, 'it will not be to destroy myself but to put myself back together again'. By committing suicide, Artaud declares, he will be able to 'reintroduce' what he calls his 'design in nature': 'I shall for the first time give things the shape of my will'. In killing himself he will free himself 'from the conditioned reflexes of my organs, which are so badly adjusted to my inner self', and life will escape from the condition of 'an absurd accident whereby I think what I am told to think'. 'Now I choose my thought and the direction of my faculties, my tendencies, my reality', Artaud asserts, ventriloquising the suicide. And yet, he argues, it is precisely through this assertion of free will, of choice, of self-determination that he can also (or therefore) 'suspend' himself: 'I put myself in suspension, without innate propensities, neutral' and in a state of 'equilibrium'.[53]

Suicide has a particular status in law, ethics, and theology and is often conceived of as the ultimate crime or sin precisely because legal, political, and religious institutions are constituted in terms of their rights over the individual. 'No one is allowed to be the judge of himself', Thomas Aquinas states unequivocally in his influential *Summa Theologiae* (1266–73), and suicide is the 'gravest of all sins' (beyond fornication, adultery, and even homicide) since it is a sin 'against God' and since '[t]o God alone belongs the power over death and life'.[54] Suicide is a particular affront to totalitarianism. In the Soviet Union in 1936, suicide was declared a form of 'treason against the Party'.[55] Suicide is a 'scandal', a 'maverick' act: it 'ruptures the social order and defies sovereign power over life and death'.[56] Holly Laird neatly sums up the multiple 'fault lines' that suicide both marks

and itself creates – between the 'determined and free, external and internal, irrational and rational, insane and sane, pessimistic and optimistic, egoistic and altruistic, cowardly and courageous, despairing and stoic, fanatical and self-martyring, idealistic and pragmatic'.[57] In multiple ways, in other words, suicide challenges our explanatory frameworks, our ways of understanding ourselves and others. And quite aside from the actual harm to others that suicides typically incur, this challenge to our conception of humanity, ethics, and reason might itself account for the vehemence with which commentators and legal practices have denounced the act and indeed made it 'other', so to speak.[58] The exceptional nature of suicide as a sin or crime goes back at least to Plato, who argues in the *Phaedo* that suicide is uniquely wrong, whatever the circumstances: it is the 'one straightforward moral question', he argues, and as such 'should never happen'. Just as you would be justifiably angry if an animal that you owned did away with itself and thereby robbed you of your property, Plato's Socrates contends, so 'it is not unreasonable to say that we must not put an end to ourselves' (unless we are forced to do so, as Socrates is, by a properly constituted court of law).[59] It is this ethical absolutism by which suicide is traditionally considered that perhaps leads Wittgenstein to declare more than two millennia later, 'If suicide is allowed, then everything is allowed' and if anything is not allowed, 'suicide is not allowed': 'This throws a light on the nature of ethics', Wittgenstein remarks, 'for suicide is, so to speak, the elementary sin'.[60]

This question of the tradition of thinking of suicide as a fundamental ethical, legal, and theological wrong has recently been brought to a point by Jacques Derrida in his remarkable meditation on the death penalty. For Derrida, at a certain point the death *penalty* overlaps with the death *drive* in relation to the 'phantasm of infinitization at the heart of finitude':[61] the death drive is expressed as a desire 'to infinitize ourselves by giving ourselves death in a calculable, decidable fashion'. In this dream or fantasy,

> we occupy, simultaneously or successively, all the positions, those of a judge, of judges, of the jury, of the executioner or the assistants, of the one condemned to death, of course, and the position of one's nearest and dearest, loved or hated, and that of the voyeuristic spectators who we are more than ever. (*DP* 258)

As this might suggest, part of the force of Derrida's seminar on the death penalty has to do with its opening up a thinking of suicide as a question of or crisis in sovereignty. In his lengthy meditation on animality, power, law, and the human in the closely related seminar on *The Beast and the*

Sovereign, Derrida reminds us (via Émile Benveniste) of the link between sovereignty, power, and *ipseity* – the sense that sovereignty marks 'the exercise of power by someone it suffices to designate as *himself*, *ipse*': standing above the law, outside and superior to it while also dispensing it, the sovereign is 'he who has the right and the strength to be and be recognized as *himself, the same, properly the same as himself*'.[62] In *The Death Penalty*, Derrida links the question of sovereignty with judicial execution, proposing that political power 'signals its sovereignty' through its exclusive right to kill its citizens: 'in truth', he declares, the state 'defines its sovereignty by this right and by this power: over the life and death of subjects' (*DP* 22).[63] In Derrida's analysis, sovereignty is figured as both the right to be recognized (or to recognize oneself) as 'properly' oneself and the right over the lives of others, the legally constituted right to kill, to put to death.

But Derrida's seminar on the death penalty also repeatedly if momentarily raises the spectre of the 'sovereign' subject asserting his power to decree and to execute the death penalty on *himself*. (The one who 'lays hands on' himself is 'in the condition of total ipseity', Améry remarks.)[64] What happens when the subject takes on what Derrida calls this 'phantasmatic mastery' (*DP* 219)?[65] In other words, what can we make of the concept of sovereignty in the context of self-killing? How can we talk of suicide in this context, or of sovereignty? Derrida's analysis raises the question of whether we can still talk of the subject as *the same, properly the same as himself* even while he is taking it upon himself both to decree and to execute the penalty of death. 'The "I", as such, is neither the agent nor the patient, even if it thinks it is committing suicide', Derrida remarks (*DP* 219). What would this mean and how can we think it? And how should we respond, in this context, to Derrida's claim that '[i]t is the other who determines the instant of my death, never I' (*DP* 225) – or that, as he claims in *The Post Card*, 'one never commits suicide, one has oneself killed'?[66]

One way to approach such questions would be to think of suicide in relation to undecidability.[67] Here again, Derrida's analysis is revealing. He speculates that when we 'rebel' against the death penalty it is not so much against death and not against the closing down of the possibility of an infinite life or immortality, but on account of its interruption of a certain indeterminacy: we rebel against this 'madness' (*DP* 257n.), against the certitude of the timing of our death – or as Derrida puts it, we resist 'the ending imposed on the opening of the incalculable chance whereby a living being has a relation to what comes, to the to-come and thus to some other as event, as guest, as *arrivant*' (*DP* 256). We will all die, in other words, but we do not know when: the death penalty is intolerable inasmuch as it puts a

date on our death, makes it calculable (and then violently brings it about). Like the death penalty, suicide seems to offer the certitude of a definite date or hour for our death, a certain timing. Blanchot makes a similar point in *The Space of Literature*, when he contends that 'death's rightful quality is impropriety, inaccuracy' and that it comes 'either too soon or too late, prematurely and as if after the fact, never coming until after its arrival'; it is, he declares, 'the abyss of present time'.[68] Suicide, by this reading, would be the attempt to tame death, to make it obedient, to make it come at the right time, punctually, so to speak. As a suicide, I am 'the great affirmer of the *present*', the one who articulates the desire 'to kill myself in an "absolute" instant'; death, coming as we choose it, would be 'the apotheosis of the *instant*'.[69] And yet, inasmuch as it can be said that the suicide is always ambivalent and that no suicide coincides with herself or indeed properly experiences her own death, it may also be understood to undo the certitude that it seems to claim. Suicide is 'not the apotheosis of the instant during which the victim exists (however fleetingly) in a state of perfect equilibrium between life and death', as John Gregg puts it in an essay on Blanchot and the 'suicidal artist'.[70] For Blanchot, indeed, suicide is 'a sort of trap', even a 'fraud', since the suicide 'comes up against death as that which doesn't happen': the suicide erroneously sees death as a *possibility* rather than as the (Heideggerian) '*possibility of impossibility*'.[71]

My thought is that the quasi-theological political power of sovereignty is disrupted, challenged, even annulled by suicide. In this sense, suicide – what Derrida refers to as the 'death that one gives oneself sovereignly' (*DP* 116) – might be seen as the obverse of the death penalty, its dark and paradoxical other.[72] If suicide can be conceived of as a final resistance to theological, legal, and political power, as the subject's refusal of the power of church and state by his removal from their legislative realms, suicide may also be said, in appropriating these powers to itself, to offer the fantasy of a certain mastery, an *illusory* sovereignty over a 'death from which I will not suffer because I take my own life', as Derrida puts it, summarising Blanchot (*DP* 248).[73]

The suicide moves herself, sovereignly, beyond or above the law. Modernity in this context might be said to involve the recognition that suicide is a crime that, 'strictly speaking', cannot be punished, as Cesare Beccaria puts in 1764, since any punishment can only be inflicted on 'the innocent, or on a cold and insensible corpse'.[74] And yet, at the same time, the suicide eradicates his or her own subjectivity, fundamentally and permanently undoing his or her own autonomy, his or her ability to act or conceive or indeed be. The suicide at once asserts him- or herself as autonomous, as

sovereign, attaining an 'instant of pure self-reflection' and simultaneously annihilating his or her own sovereignty, identity, and autonomy in an act of 'phantasmatic mastery'.[75] It is no doubt for this reason that while Derrida can argue in the first session of *The Death Penalty* (and this is his starting point, so to speak) that 'access to the death penalty' may be said to 'mark the access to what is proper to man' (since the condemned man is a 'subject of the law' and is thereby raised above the beasts), in appropriating this inaugural privilege of sovereign power, the suicide traditionally destroys even his posthumous humanity (*DP* 8).[76]

Suicide, then, may be said to constitute the ultimate assertion of power, of autonomy, of sovereignty – even over death, since it is the only act that allows death to be, or appear to be, mastered. To kill oneself is 'to retain for oneself the illusion of being omnipotent', Karl Menninger comments, 'since one is even by and in the act of suicide, master of life and death'.[77] And yet it can also be seen as the most self-defeating of acts: for Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer suicide is a logical contradiction, an assertion of the will that attempts to eradicate the will or an assertion of one's right where one has no right;[78] for Blanchot it is a 'paradoxical' assertion of hope.[79] Suicide is an act in which the subject eradicates herself as subject, as sovereign over herself, in which she annuls herself, acts to end all action. If there is nothing more empowering, there is also nothing more self-defeating.

'A sudden raucous jeering shout'

Suicide, then, is commonly represented as the ultimate crime. It is considered an affront to nature itself and, as the eighteenth-century jurist William Blackstone argues in his *Commentaries* (1765–9), as a crime against both God and the king.[80] In suicide, according to Kant, 'man sinks lower than the beasts,' and we regard the suicide as 'carrion': the suicide is a 'rebel against God'.[81] Like Claudius's description of Hamlet's suicidal mourning for his father, suicide is 'a fault to heaven, / A fault against the dead, a fault to nature, / To reason most absurd' (1.ii.101–3). J. A. Hiddleston reminds us that in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, suicides are situated in the seventh circle of hell, below heretics and murderers, because suicide is 'a sin without remission, against hope and against the holy spirit, essentially an unnatural crime'.[82] But while in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there was a major shift in the understanding of suicide in both religious and legal terms, this sense of the exceptionalism of suicide continues through the twentieth century and up to the present day. The fact of

the suicide's seemingly narcissistic destruction not only of the self but also of the world makes the act an affront like no other, uniquely damaging and reprehensible.[83] Suicide is 'a sudden raucous jeering shout in a genteel gathering', an 'obscenity', according to Joyce Carol Oates, and the fact that it turns a 'private gesture' into one that is 'violently and unmistakably public' itself accounts for the punishments that it has accrued over the centuries.[84]

Taken, as it so often has been, as a crime, suicide is one in which the perpetrator and victim are the same: the act involves a 'murder' *of* the self, but also *by* the self, in Karl Menninger's formulation.[85] Suicide is also, paradoxically, a crime in which, while there is no perpetrator and no primary victim (or in which the perpetrator *is* the victim), countless secondary victims can be left in its wake – individuals who suffer at one remove, suffer by indirection, in mourning, as survivors. Writing in 1908 from a Christian standpoint in an often-quoted comment, G. K. Chesterton brings out the affront that suicide still constitutes to the world: the act is an 'ultimate and absolute evil', he argues, since 'a man who kills a man kills a man', but the suicide 'kills all men', 'wipes out the world'. His death is a 'sneer' to the universe. Suicide, Chesterton asserts, 'is different from other crimes' because it 'makes even crime impossible'.[86] While romantic love has often been presented as a key cause of suicide and the failure of love one of its triggers, suicide is also, as Freud argues in 'Mourning and Melancholia', *like* love, since both suicide and, in one of its classic formulations, love involve an annihilation of the self and of the world.[87] This is what Foucault calls the 'Faustian pact' of sexuality, the willingness to 'exchange life in its entirety for sex itself', such that sex is 'worth dying for'; when 'a long while ago the West discovered love, it bestowed on it a value high enough to make death acceptable', Foucault remarks.[88] This is nowhere made more clear than in Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), one of the most prominent and influential representations of love-suicide, of *Liebestod*, in European literature. In Goethe's novel, as Lotte finally begins to understand that Werther plans to kill himself in the name of his love for her, we are told that the world was 'lost to them'.[89] Even in a secular or postreligious context, where suicide is no longer conceived of as sin, and in a context in which the act has been decriminalized, writers continue to reflect the enormity of the act, describing the individual that kills herself as deciding to 'erase the world', as Edouard Levé puts it or, in Adam Phillips's striking phrase, as undertaking a 'nuclear war for one'.[90] The suicide is an 'omnicide', a 'worldkiller', according to Martin Amis: his crime absolute, his transgression unforgivable, irremediable.[91]

It is also partly for this reason that suicide continues to be one of the remaining taboos of our era.[92] An act that utterly rejects even the world that might sanction it, suicide is a 'negation of the liberal promise on which modern democracies are founded'.[93] But as a taboo, it is highly curious one. It is clearly not the case that suicide cannot be spoken of or engaged with. Suicide is studied, reported on, analysed, and regularly discussed in multiple sites and both within and outside the disciplinary regimes of multiple discourses, especially psychology, sociology, social work studies, medicine, ethics, psychiatry, ethnography, epidemiology, historiography, and suicidology itself. It is also an act or event that is central to innumerable novels, paintings, stories, poems, plays, movies, songs, and other cultural artefacts. The strong suicide taboo inheres, however, in restrictions or limitations on how the topic can be addressed. Replacing the hegemony of legal and theological discourses of suicide as crime or sin that were dominant from the time of Saint Augustine until at least the late eighteenth century, as well as the medicalisation of the act as a function simply of madness, a consequence of being *non compos mentis* or suffering from 'temporary insanity' (as that account evolved and became dominant during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), modern understandings of suicide are largely constructed even (or especially) within medicine and psychiatry, in terms of its interdiction, as suicide prevention strategy and practice. That which resists or threatens the interdiction on the act of suicide tends instantly to be disavowed and disallowed. From the alleged suicide craze following the publication of Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (the 'Werther effect') in the late eighteenth century to popular reporting of the Bridgend suicide 'epidemic' of 2007–9 and the current spate of suicides by self-immolation in Libya, the very act of publicly speaking of suicide is identified as itself a potential *cause* of suicide.[94] In this respect, suicide is held to be potentially contaminating, psychologically contagious, and there is a pervasive societal anxiety with regard to representations of suicide that do not explicitly denounce or interdict the act: the only fully *legitimate* form of suicide discourse is the discourse of suicide prevention. For good reason, no doubt, other discourses – including philosophical debates around the ethics or legitimacy of the act itself – are seen as problematic, suspect, or indeed illegitimate. For there is always the possibility of a slippage from a literary or philosophical discussion of the right to suicide (for example, as an act that constitutes an expression of individual freedom or personal agency) to the advocacy of or encouragement or temptation towards specific acts of suicide. Like suicide ideation itself (the act of thinking or imagining that can at the same time indicate a propensity towards or even precipitate the act

or fend it off), contemporary discourses of suicide are often guarded and self-guarding, concerned that as forms of *pharmaka* they might not only prevent but also encourage an act that is perceived as a fundamental and unambiguous harm.

Imagining Suicide

And yet suicide is a pervasive literary theme: it is, in a sense, everywhere in literature, both in its explicit engagements with the act and in other ways. As Holly Laird comments, suicide can be considered as a 'dauntingly conventional trope' in literature (it can be 'a device to end a plot line', she remarks, or 'to start one', as a digressive moment of pathos or as a warning).[95] Suicide, in fact, is depicted, imagined, discussed, or thought in literary texts far in excess of its actual occurrence: statistically speaking, we encounter many more suicides in literature than we do in the so-called real world. Statistics on suicide rates are notoriously unreliable and are especially so for periods before the late nineteenth century. But it is worth noting that while Shakespeare's work, for example, features a total of fifty-two suicides amongst its 1,300-odd speaking characters (one in twenty-five), actual suicide rates rarely get above double figures per one hundred thousand (in the United Kingdom, for example, current annual rates for all sections of the population range from c.3 (female) to c.12 (male) per 100,000). Comparisons are difficult to make, since those for Shakespeare do not pertain to a single year or to a population and since they are represented within texts that need, by definition, to be narratable and are therefore more likely to deal with extreme events, including suicide. Nevertheless, the fact that the rate of suicide amongst Shakespeare's characters equates to c.4000 per 100,000 or 4 per cent means that suicide is far more prevalent inside the plays than outside them (up to a thousand times more common, indeed). I will offer other accounts of this statistical anomaly of suicide in literature and suggest other ways in which it might be explained, but here I want to offer the first and perhaps fundamental hypothesis: suicide figures prominently in canonical literary texts not just because of sociocultural concerns about it but also because suicide is always bound up in fictionality and therefore in the literary. Suicide involves imagination, temporality, fictionality, and even a form of mimesis, since the suicide must first represent the world to herself in a certain formation in order to think, to wish for, to imagine a world that is intrinsically different, one that includes her own death. Suicide, the thought of suicide, is both mimetic and not – it is non-representational, inventive, inspirational. Or to put it differently, literature

is the space in which suicide can be articulated, expressed, and imagined. Both bound up with and moving beyond the discourses of law, religion, and medicine, the imaginative space of literature allows for the possibility of thinking the impossible, of admitting the inadmissible – of imagining the unimaginable but inevitable possibility of a world in which I am no longer present, and that I might bring that world about.

But suicide, that 'uncanny, incredible, inexplicable' act,[96] also has the unique capacity both to make and to unmake meaning, to offer and to remove a life's *sense*. By presenting what appears to be a self-made ending, suicide seems to give shape to the random and uncontrollable eventhood of a life. Outside of the discursive disciplinary regimes of law, medicine, and religion, suicide always, I would say, tempts us to interpret life as *meaningful*. Suicide seems to narrativize a life, to give it teleological shape. Implicitly and necessarily narrativizing, suicide both produces narrative (since it constitutes a teleology, an end) and demands it, not least to account for or resolve its constitutive ambiguity. As Margaret Higonnet argues, suicide 'provokes narrative' not only with regard to that which is 'inscribed by the actor' him- or herself but also in terms of the stories that we build around the suicide as 'an enigmatic object of interpretation'.[97] And yet what twentieth-century literature suggests, again and again, is that that shape and that meaning are always just out of reach, tantalisingly elusive, intangible: suicide provokes our meaning-making capacities, persuades us to interpret, but always necessarily resists those powers. Like other kinds of death but with a particular urgency, suicidal death *has* to be explained and cannot be; it both offers and removes a dream of coherence.

In this context, I would suggest that literature has a particular status since in its engagement with the inadmissible it allows for the possibility of imagining suicide and of feeling empathy towards individuals who undertake it (while also testing the limits of reason, imagination, and empathy). Literary suicide stands outside of the dominant modern discourses of suicide prevention even as it has the potential to scandalize them. As the institution that 'allows one to *say everything*, in *every way*',[98] literature can invoke suicide without either advocating or simply rejecting or condemning the act. And it is, we might say, the discourse in which the almost unimaginable grief, anger, and guilt that so often follow the suicide of a friend, lover, or family member can be construed, figured, or imagined. It is perhaps for this reason that literary criticism – the discipline that aligns itself both with the often explicitly declared social and political irresponsibility of the aesthetic field and with the scholarly responsibility presumed inherent in the constitution of an academic discipline – has found it so difficult

to recognize the significance of suicide in the Western canon. Literary criticism is constituted by its own forms of suicide denial, most prominently in the suppression of the significance of suicide in the literary canon that characterizes criticism's major forms, schools, and modes. It would be the task of 'literary suicidology' – a project that I would like to name and in some ways to inaugurate in this book – to bring to the fore that which has been overlooked, denied, or elided in critical engagements with suicide in the modern literary canon. It is the 'normalization' of suicide in the late nineteenth century that begins to open up literature as the discourse in which the act can be imagined and evoked: located in the interstices of law, ethics, and medicine, the space of literature allows for complex questions of responsibility and agency, and it demands that suicide be not simply dismissed as transgression or felony (against God, nature, and the king) or as madness ('temporary insanity'). In the new cultural and literary dispensation, suicide can take on, so to speak, a life of its own.[99]

Twentieth-Century Fictions of Suicide

Given the prominence of the act in the literary canon and the fact that, as Jean Baechler comments, it is one of the most 'unremittingly studied' of human behaviours, the critical response to literary representations of suicide has been surprisingly limited.[100] The only book-length overview of suicide in English literature is Al Alvarez's *The Savage God* (1971), a psychoanalytically inflected study that eschews a thematic, narratological, or formal analysis in favour of the essentially biographical argument that suicide is related to artistic creativity. While the book is historically and conceptually wide-ranging, it is ultimately limited in focus and contentious in its major premise. Almost half-a-century later, we need to return to Alvarez but also to question his starting point and methodology, and to radically revise his account of the significance of suicide in literature. A number of studies have recently begun to examine the question of suicide in twentieth-century writing: in *Suicide and Contemporary Science Fiction* (2015), Carlos Gutiérrez-Jones argues that the act can involve 'creative self-destruction' and that the radical change entailed by suicide can be 'productive' in the context of science fiction; Jeffrey Berman's *Surviving Literary Suicide* (1999) examines selected modern authors (Chopin, Woolf, Hemingway, Plath, Sexton, Styron) from a pedagogical and reader-response perspective ('Can literature play a role in suicide prevention?', Berman asks, or can a literary text 'endanger a reader's health?'; how do writers like Sylvia Plath 'transmute personal suffering into potent art'?); Elizabeth Leake

suggestively explores the work of a number of Italian writers who have committed suicide in *After Words: Suicide and Authorship in Twentieth Century Italy* (2011); Holly A. Laird's essay 'Between the (Disciplinary) Acts' (2012) helpfully illuminates the evolving disciplinary status of suicide studies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and two illuminating but unpublished doctoral theses, Jared Stark's 'Beyond Words: Suicide and Modern Narrative' (1998) and Christopher Damien Chung's '"Almost Unnamable": Suicide in the Modernist Novel' (2008), have added significantly to our understanding of suicide in the modernist period.[101] In addition, there are a number of studies of individual twentieth-century authors that take suicide as their focus, including Deborah Gentry's *The Art of Dying: Suicide in the Works of Kate Chopin and Sylvia Path* (2007), Mary Joseph's *Suicide in Henry James's Fiction* (1994), Frank R. Giordano's *I'd Have My Life Unbe: Thomas Hardy's Self-Destructive Characters* (1977), Berman's *Joseph Conrad: Writing as Rescue*, and Paul Wake's *Conrad's Marlow: Narrative and Death in 'Youth', 'Heart of Darkness', 'Lord Jim', and 'Chance'* (2007).[102] There have been significant advances in the historiography of suicide in recent years, and alongside philosophical, sociological, epidemiological, psychological, and other approaches, such studies provide a richly detailed context for the present book. Notable studies include Georges Minois's cultural history of the act up to the turn of the nineteenth century, *History of Suicide* (trans., 1999), and Marzio Barbagli's more recent *Farewell to the World: A History of Suicide* (trans., 2015), as well as Zilla Gabrielle Cahn's wide-ranging intellectual history, *Suicide in French Thought from Montesquieu to Cioran* (1998), and John Weaver and David Wright's edited volume of essays, *Histories of Suicide* (2009).[103] And Simon Critchley's *Notes on Suicide* (2015) offers a bracing philosophical meditation on suicide and its implications that seeks to open up the topic to further discussion. But in spite of these variously informative studies, there has been little examination of suicide as a critical element in twentieth-century literature generally and little investigation of the impulses and implication of the prominence of the act in the era's literary discourse. This book seeks to address such questions by taking a series of case studies ranging from Ford Madox Ford and James Joyce at the beginning of the twentieth century to Jeffrey Eugenides, David Foster Wallace, and the genre of the contemporary suicide memoir at its end and the beginning of our own.

In Chapter 2, I address historical and philosophical dimensions of suicide and suicidality, focusing on the idea of suicide as an essentially human act to suggest that representations of suicide open up fundamental questions in philosophy and in literary studies. I argue that suicide can

be conceived of as constituting a limit case with respect to the question of what it means to be human, and discuss philosophical pessimism as the dominant philosophical paradigm for the consideration of the act, the concept of the death drive in Schopenhauer and Freud, and the emergence of sociology as the prevailing account of suicidality at the turn of the twentieth century. And I attempt briefly to sketch the pre-twentieth-century literary history of suicide in order to examine the emergence of a sense of the act as normalized, as everyday, or quotidian around the turn of the century.

Chapter 3 then focuses in on a single novel, Ford Madox Ford's remarkable early-modernist *The Good Soldier* (1915). Many of the major novels of the period – including D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913) and *Women in Love* (1920), Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *The Waves* (1931), William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), and Elizabeth Bowen's *To the North* (1932) and *The House in Paris* (1935) – prominently feature suicide ideation and acts of suicide. Taking Ford's novel as exemplary, I argue that modernist suicide narratives typically involve a critical break or hiatus, a crisis in narrative logic, causality, and chronology. Modernist suicide narratives both require and resist interpretation and, as such, work to produce an epistemological break or scandal.

Chapter 4 examines the work of James Joyce. While the question has largely been overlooked in Joyce's critical reception, suicide in fact figures notably in every major text from *Dubliners*, through *Stephen Hero* and *Portrait of the Artist as Young Man*, to *Exiles, Ulysses*, and *Finnegans Wake*. Building on the idea of modernist suicide as a site of narrative and hermeneutic undecidability, I suggest that, in Joyce's work, suicide becomes pervasive, quotidian, normalized – even in the pathos that the act often evokes. In the end, what is remarkable about suicide in Joyce's work is the way that the act is in fact *not* emphasized, *not* marked: it is unremarkable. What is extraordinary about the acts of suicide that stud Joyce's writing is that they are not extraordinary.

Moving to the middle decades of the twentieth century, Chapter 5 focuses on the work of Stevie Smith and Sylvia Plath – two writers known, above all, for their concern with death and suicide. Reading Stevie Smith alongside Sylvia Plath helps us to touch on various aspects of the twentieth-century literary culture of suicide – including questions of suicide ideation and expression, the death drive and death wish, suicide and personal identity, suicide talk as therapeutic, attempted suicide as a 'cry for help', the nature of the suicide note, and the production and dispersal of meaning in suicide writing. In particular, the work of these two remarkable writers allows us to gauge, in relation to suicide ideation, the distinction between

the relief, comfort, or redemption that it affords, on the one hand, and the pain, anxiety, and rage that it expresses on the other – and to consider the extent to which such relief and such pain constitute the limits of literature's encounter with suicide.

Chapter 6 focuses on the relationship between suicide, affectlessness, and superficiality in contemporary fiction and on what we might call the postmodern epistemological break. Beginning with the shocking moment of Richard Brown's suicide in Michael Cunningham's 1998 novel *The Hours*, I suggest that a key impulse behind contemporary suicide narratives involves the drive to know, the impossible, empathic desire to experience suicide – the quest to know what it is 'like', how it feels, as well as why it happens and what it means. Like Jeffrey Eugenides's 1993 novel *The Virgin Suicides*, Cunningham's novel is characterized by an empathy scandal: a resistance to or troubling of the reader's ability to identify, understand, sympathize with, or otherwise experience narratorial, characterological, or authorial empathy. The most pointed, imaginatively capacious contemporary suicide narratives remind us that what the literary novel more generally is *for* involves not so much a superior or refined form of empathy as an appreciation of empathy's limits.

The final chapter of the book discusses the work of one of the most well-known literary suicides of the first decades of the twenty-first century, David Foster Wallace. Rather than addressing the complex biographical question of the author's suicide directly, however, in this chapter I look instead at the ways in which Wallace's work itself addresses a cluster of concerns – affect and boredom, solitude and despair, the interiority of novelistic discourse, and the illusion of spiritual redemption through suicide. In representing people as suffering from loneliness and from clinical depression, and as escaping depression by resorting to the uniquely, indeed the metaphysically solitary act of suicide, I argue that Wallace draws on the special power of literature both to figure the authorial subject and to disguise it, to hide, to depersonalize the self, to eradicate it, in or by articulating it.

Writing about Jean Améry in *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi comments that 'like other suicides', that of his fellow Auschwitz inmate 'allows for a nebula of explanations'. Playing on 'nebula' (*nebulosi* in Italian and stemming from the Latin for 'mist'), Levi suggests that suicides in general do not lack for explanations: rather, the act has too many explanations, and they are intangible, mobile, and elusive.[104] The epilogue to *Suicide Century* moves away from fictional representations of suicide in twentieth-century literature to identify and examine the recently developed genre of the suicide memoir. The turn of our century has seen a spate of significant

prose memoirs that confront the finally unaccountable fact of the actual suicide of a family member, lover, or spouse – including Tim Lott's *The Scent of Dried Roses* (1997), Jill Bialosky's *History of a Suicide* (2011), Karen Green's *Bough Down* (2013), Miriam Toews's *All My Puny Sorrows* (2014), and Jeremy Gavron's *A Woman on the Edge of Time* (2015). I seek briefly to explore the intractable and traumatic conundrum of suicide for those left behind, focusing on the aestheticisation of grief, the limits of elegiac writing, and the ultimately futile rage for the order of explanation that characterizes the specific strategies of mourning encountered in the suicide memoir.

CHAPTER 2

'The animal that can commit suicide'
History, Philosophy, Literature

Although one might contest the assertion that deciding whether or not to kill oneself is '*the* fundamental question of philosophy', as Albert Camus famously asserts in the opening to his essay on the question from 1942,[1] suicide may certainly be said to open up fundamental issues in philosophy and literary studies – in the first place as something like a limit case with respect to the question of what it means to be human. In a series of late seminars posthumously translated and published as *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Jacques Derrida enumerates the 'necessarily indefinite' catalogue of 'powers' that are said to be denied the nonhuman animal, including 'speech, reason, experience of death, mourning, culture, institution, politics, technique, clothing, lying . . . effacement of the trace, gift, laughter, tears, respect'.[2] Elaborating a venerable tradition of such thinking, in *Aporias* Derrida earlier proposed that the distinction between nature and culture, between 'biological life and culture', and even between the animal and the human can be understood specifically in terms of the 'experience of death': since it cannot formalize, represent, conceive, speak of the future, the nonhuman animal also cannot conceive of or imagine (its own) death and therefore has no 'relation to death'.[3] The point is made in Rousseau's *Second Discourse* (1755), for example, where it is claimed that 'an animal will never know what death is' and indeed that 'the knowledge of death and of its terrors' was 'one of man's first acquisitions which man gains on leaving the animal condition'.[4] Early in the next century, Schopenhauer argued in *The World as Will and Representation* (at 'the beginning of the last, most serious, and most important of our books') that while for humans the 'terrifying' knowledge of death 'appeared along with the faculty of reason', the animal lives 'without any real knowledge' of it.[5] In the twentieth century, Jacques Choron, for one, argued that preconditions for suicide include a certain knowledge of death and 'man's growing consciousness of himself as an individual', both of which, he contends, are absent in nonhuman animals.[6] In this respect, knowledge of death necessarily allows, in itself, for

the possibility that the individual will seek out her own death, will bring it about. Inasmuch as I may be said to 'know' death – know that it will necessarily occur both to other living beings and to me – I also know that I can advance it (in the case of others, yes, but also and therefore in my own case).

The idea that suicide is a specifically human practice and potential goes back at least to classical antiquity – the first-century Roman scholar Josephus, for example, declares that no animal 'deliberately seeks death or kills itself' due to 'nature's law' (viz the 'will to live') – while in his early nineteenth-century autobiography, Goethe describes suicide as an 'event of human nature' that 'demands the sympathy of every man, and in every epoch must be discussed anew'.[7] The Italian writer Giacomo Leopardi argues in 'Dialogue between Plotinus and Porphyry' (1827) that 'other animals do not desire to put an end to their lives' and that one 'never sees brute beasts . . . either commit suicide, or regard death as anything but a condition to be struggled against', even while also claiming that the act is 'inhuman' and the suicide is 'like a monster': for Leopardi, suicide is both quintessentially human and quintessentially not.[8] The influential twentieth-century suicidologist Edwin Shneidman proposes that suicide is 'an exclusively human response to extreme psychological pain, the pain of human suffering', while the historian Georges Minois also contends that suicide is 'an exclusively human . . . behaviour'.[9] For the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, the human might even be *defined* as 'the animal that can commit suicide', and Jean Baechler argues that suicide is 'specifically and universally human' and that it may even be considered 'the price we pay for being human' (however deplorable the act may be, Baechler declares, it is 'one of the illustrations of humanity').[10] In *A Short History of Decay* (1949), Emil Cioran proposes that the thought of suicide is at the same time inescapable under certain circumstances and intrinsically, uniquely human. 'No church, no civil institution has as yet invented a single argument valid against suicide', he contends, since there is no answer to 'the man who can no longer endure life': 'suicide is one of man's distinctive characteristics, one of his discoveries; no animal is capable of it', he declares. For Cioran, human life without the possibility of suicide would be 'less curious, less picturesque': without it, we would 'lack a strange climate and a series of deadly possibilities which have their aesthetic value'.[11] According to such writers, thinking of suicide, imagining it, planning it, is what humans do and what *only* humans do. In this sense, imagining one's own death, and imagining bringing about that death, is a peculiarly human tendency that can even be said to govern the limits of the human – of the human

as autonomous, agential, rational, responsible, and as language-bearing, future-directed, and culturally embedded.

From within a certain tradition, therefore, suicide can be taken as the measure of the human, that which no animal (not even the usual examples – lemmings, scorpions, or faithful dogs) has yet been known to commit.[12] Indeed, 'thought' itself, by a certain definition, may be understood as constitutively suicidal if we extrapolate from Hegel's insistence in his *Science of Logic* that the process of thinking (which is itself said to distinguish the human animal) emerges from a negation of experience or the empirical ('thinking is indeed essentially the negation of something immediately on hand', Hegel remarks).[13] Inasmuch as life involves empirical, embodied existence, thought, in the Hegelian model, *transcends* life. Camus develops this idea of the distinctiveness of human thought in *The Myth of Sisyphus* when he comments that it is 'ridiculous reason' that 'sets me in opposition to all creation . . . If I were a tree among trees', Camus speculates, or 'a cat among animals, this life would have a meaning,' or such a question would not arise in the first place since 'I should belong to this world'.[14] It is not only the case that suicide *begins* in thought, in imagination, and in the specific kind of thinking that we tend to associate with the human animal, but that there is a sense in which thought itself both offers the possibility of a certain suicidality and also continually, repeatedly performs it.

Things Could Be Otherwise

To begin to think about the relationship between thinking and suicide, we might consider the discourse that, of necessity, most directly confronts the act: the philosophical pessimism of writers and thinkers such as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, Cioran, and Camus. The rich, if somewhat marginalized discourse of philosophical pessimism proposes, against the overwhelming might of social, cultural, political, and religious redemption and progress narratives, that there is no future in which our suffering will be redeemed, and indeed no future in which any advance will be made with regard to the reduction or elimination of the misery and suffering of the world. In this context, philosophical pessimism necessarily engages the question of suicide. It confronts the possibility that, when properly viewed, life must be understood to be constituted by misery and suffering to the extent that it would be entirely reasonable, if not rather sensible, to end one's own life. In a seeming paradox, however, philosophical pessimism standardly argues *against* ending one's life. In fact, it is precisely because philosophical pessimism seems to lead inexorably to suicide that

it most urgently and most seriously addresses the question. (In this sense, philosophical pessimism might be compared to philosophical scepticism, the discourse that *doubts* everything in order to reassure itself that something at least, even if it is called 'doubt', might be *not* doubted.)[15] In spite of this apparent self-contradiction, then, one might argue that it is from within the discourse of pessimism that the properly philosophical question of suicide – as opposed to the question encountered in standard accounts of ethics, law, theology, medicine, epidemiology, psychology, or psychiatry – has been most fully and rigorously addressed. *Just because* the rationality of philosophical pessimism leads to suicide as its logical consequence – as the presumed result of its way of conceiving the world – the discourse engages closely with the question; it does so just because it takes the question *seriously*.[16] In an attempt to explain why, despite appearances, suicide should not be regarded as viable or desirable or logical or reasonable, philosophical pessimism addresses the question with earnest intent, with particular interest, and particular care. It is from the perspective of philosophical pessimism, then, that we might start to think about the question of suicide.[17]

The contribution of philosophical pessimism to a theory of suicide and an understanding of the act's cultural importance can be illustrated by reference to a powerful, if somewhat idiosyncratic thought experiment that Joshua Foa Dienstag undertakes towards the end of his 2006 study *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethics, Spirit*. Attempting to illustrate the idea that against the hegemony of a certain liberal optimism that underpins our habitual and tenacious belief in 'progress', pessimism is fundamental, unavoidable, necessary, Dienstag speculates in quasi-evolutionary terms about what the first human thought might have been. 'There must have been a first thought', Dienstag claims, contentiously, before even more provocatively suggesting that such a thought must have been impelled, must have been *necessary*, rather than random or contingent. For Dienstag, this 'first' thought must have encouraged the individual that first had the thought to continue thinking since, as anyone who has ever tried to think knows, thinking is hard work: you need a reason to go to the effort of thinking in the first place, Dienstag suggests, and to go on making the effort once you have started (see *PPES* 261). For Dienstag, it is worth asking about the first thought because of the importance that philosophers such as Descartes, Hegel, and Schopenhauer place on the act of thinking in our understanding of what it means to be human. Hegel, after all, proposes that a key distinguishing mark of the human animal is its capacity for thought. 'It is the nature of a human being to think', he remarks in *The*

Science of Logic, whereas animals, who 'stop short at the sensory', do not make this 'leap' into the 'infinite'.[18] Thinking, for Hegel, is just what being the animal called human entails (along with the understanding that one is an animal),[19] even while, or just because, as Albert Camus has it, 'Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined' (not least because thought, reflection, itself is 'the precondition of suicide').[20]

So Dienstag's brief thought experiment, his attempt to define or identify the evolutionarily primal thought, has to do with the question of what might in the first place have driven the animal that we call 'human' to think. Or, to put it differently, the experiment or hypothesis seeks to locate the moment at which, by an originary act of thinking, the animal *becomes* human. If we accept the identification of humanity with reflective thinking, in other words, Dienstag's thought experiment may be said to tell us something about what it means to be human. Despite its strangeness and its seeming epistemological futility, Dienstag's thought experiment nevertheless yields intriguing and perhaps surprising results – results that might help us begin to consider the question of literature and suicide. His provisional, somewhat tentative answer to the question of what first made an individual think is that the first thought might have been the coolly expressed idea that 'things' – including, first of all, life, the fact of being alive – 'could be otherwise' (even while he concedes that the thought must have found expression in something more like a grunt than a sentence) (*PPES* 261). Dienstag's argument is as follows: by evolutionary definition, animals tend to be more or less well adapted to their environment (this being just what evolution *means*), and part of that adaptation involves the ability to withstand the ordinary but generally bearable amounts of suffering that the animal's environment will inevitably produce. But an animal that is forced by some accident or misfortune to suffer from prolonged and intense pain, forced to suffer from inescapable and 'unnatural' pain, might at a certain evolutionary point in neurological development and just because of that experience of irremediable, intolerable suffering, be *forced* to think, be forced into thought as the only possible escape from the pain that it is unable to tolerate. The particular kind of suffering that Dienstag is imagining here is the kind of pain that traps the animal, that makes it 'squirm', that forces it to try to 'hide', as he puts it, 'from existence'. He imagines the pain continuing, unabated until finally, unable to escape it, the animal resorts to *mental* flight in the thought, the grunt really, that 'things could be otherwise' (*PPES* 261).

For Dienstag, the 'thought' that can be translated into the English sentence, 'Things could be otherwise' (whatever linguistic or prelinguistic

form one might conceive of it having taken), is fundamental, foundational for any thinking of thinking itself. Specifically, the sentence includes the three elements that are said to be necessary for thinking – it encompasses, in other words, thinking's three fundamental conditions of possibility. First, thinking must allow for the 'generalizability of existence': 'things' in 'things could be otherwise' denotes just such a possibility. Second, thinking involves temporality, and 'could be' in 'things could be otherwise' encompasses, minimally, the idea of time, of the difference between 'now' and 'not now'. Third, thinking includes the possibility of negation since, as Hegel would have it, the idea of the other of 'things' – 'not-things', 'not-existence' – is itself the essence of thinking: the thought that 'things could be otherwise' includes negation in 'otherwise'. For Dienstag, then, the thought that 'things could be otherwise' has all the elements of what would properly be called thinking, and the sentence can therefore be said to present thinking's condition of possibility. At the same time, he suggests, crucially, that the thought that 'things could be otherwise' '*enables* further thought' because it indicates the '*value* of thought' in offering 'the prospect of an end of suffering' (*PPES* 261–2). Since the kind of suffering that Dienstag is positing is both intolerable *and* inescapable, its cessation must logically entail the prospect of the end of one's life and the hope and desire to bring about that end. In other words, by Dienstag's logic, the originary human thought is ultimately of suicide – the idea that one might end one's life in order to escape from intolerable and otherwise inescapable pain.

It would perhaps be helpful to try to flesh out this idea, to attempt to elaborate what I am extrapolating from Dienstag's thought experiment as his arguably rather stark conclusion about the nature of human thought. Behind Dienstag's idea is the work of one of the major European philosophers of pessimism and one of a handful of major philosophical thinkers to address properly the question of suicide, Arthur Schopenhauer. In particular, Dienstag appeals to Schopenhauer's emphasis on time both in human thinking and in the experience of suffering. In his essay, 'On the Suffering of the World', Schopenhauer argues that 'everything is powerfully enhanced' in humans by their habit of thinking of 'the absent and the future'. For Schopenhauer, it is in this habit that 'anxiety, fear, and hope come into existence for the first time'. Memory and expectation 'press much more heavily' on the human than do 'the present reality of pleasures or pains', to which 'the animal is limited' (*PP* 2:294). For humans, unlike other animals, 'reflection, that condenser of pleasures and pains' means that such things 'accumulate' through 'memory and foresight'. By contrast, when a

nonhuman animal suffers, however many times it has suffered before, it experiences only 'the suffering of the present moment'. Such suffering 'cannot be accumulated' and thereby intensified: the suffering of the animal is what it is, but does not involve memory, anticipation, and reflection. The tragedy of being human, for Schopenhauer, is that through 'reflection' (thought, consciousness, self-awareness, expectation, hope, trepidation) our happiness *and* our misery are exaggerated, the latter indeed *because* of the former – to the extent that the human subject is, through reflection, subject to 'momentary, and sometimes even fatal, ecstasy' or sent otherwise to 'the depths of despair and suicide' (*PP* 2:294). Self-shattering bliss, *jouissance*, and its other, suicidal despair, then, are consequent upon the human capacity for *thought* – upon the tragic tendency of human beings to remember, to speculate, to imagine, to predict, to reflect. From this fundamental ability to think, and therefore to think of the future, to construct for itself a future-inflected despair, the human animal generates not only the desire for death but also the concept and possibility of suicide itself: out of thinking, which *means* thinking of the future, suicide is made possible, inaugurated, invented. Thinking is not only the 'precondition' of suicide, as Camus would have it, but is *itself* originarily suicidal.

In Dienstag's evolutionary allegory, his philosophical Just-So story, the originary thought that 'things could be otherwise' – this starting place of human thinking, its departure from the nonreflexive, the unthinking, from the futurelessness of a purely animal existence – is also a 'death-wish'. In Dienstag's thought experiment, the suffering animal, the not-yet human animal that is undergoing intolerable suffering, is brought to thinking, forced to think, on account of a constitutively future- or other-directed conception:

> The animal wants the pain to stop. But it knows not time. It cannot separate the pain from existence. It wants to perish of the 'pain-now'. Since its first thought is of existence as a whole and its first wish to depart from it, we can only call this thought (in our modern language) a death-wish. The discovery (or the creation) of time is thus linked to the wish to depart from existence, from the 'things-now', from life. At the end of the sentence, we might say, the human, no longer an animal, knows time. It knows that to depart from the things-now is not necessarily to die. But not at the beginning. There the animal only wants to depart from the only existence there is.

'And so we say', Dienstag concludes, 'that humanity only began to live when it wanted to die' (*PPES* 262–3). In other words (and despite the final refusal of Schopenhauer and other pessimists to condone the act),

philosophical pessimism proposes that the desire to die and therefore logically the impulse to bring about one's death, the thought of suicide – the only hope that pessimism can countenance – begins with the beginning of thought, *is* indeed the beginning of thought. Suicidality, the desire, impulse, drive to end one's life, is at the origin of thought and thinking: what makes us human, a certain thinking, is bound up with suicide. Suicide is in this sense the possibility and condition of being human.

We might conceive of Dienstag's thought experiment, his allegory of the origin of humanity in and as a thinking of one's own self-accomplished death, as a Fall narrative. As is typical of such narratives, Dienstag's is not only a parable of the evolution of a species but also a metaphor for the development of each of its individuals. In this sense, it would not just be a solitary originary human who had the thought of suicide – who experiences a fall into a thinking of suicide – at some mythical moment in evolutionary history, but a process undergone by each one of us. The thought of suicide, in other words, may be a thought that is known, owned, or invented by every individual as part of the anguish of adolescence – that 'single most stressful and frightening period of human development', as David Foster Wallace calls the time when 'the adulthood we claim to crave begins to present itself as a real and narrowing system of responsibilities and limitations (taxes, death) and when we yearn inside for a return to the same childish oblivion we pretend to scorn'.[21] Cognitively, adolescence might be defined in terms of the discovery of certain brutal, frankly unconscionable but irreversible facts – that life ends in death; that suffering is unavoidable; that neither the world nor other people are entirely malleable; and that others cannot always be bent to one's requirements, wishes, desires, to the imperative of 'His Majesty the Ego'.[22] There is the fundamental fact, to which one must become accustomed, then, that the child's fantasy of omnipotence is precisely a fantasy: as Adam Phillips puts it, adulthood occurs 'when it begins to occur to you that you may not be leading a charmed life'.[23] Schopenhauer uses the metaphor of a disappointing theatrical performance to sum up this predicament in his essay, 'Additional Remarks on the Doctrine of the Suffering of the World':

> In early youth we sit before the impending course of our life like children at the theatre before the curtain is raised, who sit there in happy and excited expectations of the things that are to come. It is a blessing that we do not know what will actually come. For to the man who knows, the children may at times appear to be like innocent delinquents who are condemned not to death, it is true, but to life and have not yet grasped the purport of their sentence. (*PP* 2:298–9)

What Schopenhauer sees as the universal, permanent, inescapable condition of human suffering – suffering experienced, one way or another, by each one of us as we develop – may be said to result in the *thought* that 'things could be different', that this suffering, this anguish could be ended – but ended only on condition of the death of the individual who has the thought. Even if held only momentarily and even if it is hardly acknowledged, it may be that such a thought – the thought of a specific kind of 'death-wish', whatever form it takes, whether literalized, verbalized, acknowledged, or not – is intrinsic to human development.

But I suggest that we extend Dienstag's thought experiment in another way. We might speculate that the emergence of thought also entails the beginning of the literary: if the condition of possibility of thinking is encapsulated by the phrase 'things could be otherwise', one might recognize that the phrase also constitutes a certain conception of literature itself. 'Things' reminds us of the way that a poem, novel, or play represents the world: it reminds us of the fundamental conception of the literary as, in the first place, mimetic. Whatever else it might do, the literary text almost always relates to the world to the minimal extent of copying or representing some aspect of it – its *things*, however abstract, conceptual, verbal, intellectual they may be. 'Could be' allows for the fundamental element of temporality according to the laws of which every text, even a lyric poem or haiku, may be said to operate. In addition, the conditional or hypothetical nature of 'could be', and 'could be *otherwise*', indicates a fundamental element of fictionality by which the literary is necessarily governed: however close to the world it is, however representationally accurate a literary text might be, fiction, the counterfactual – what is *not* – is also necessarily at work in it. However opaquely, however indirectly, the literary text announces 'this is how things are, and they could be otherwise'. When we talk about invention, imagination, or fiction, indeed, we may be understood to be referring to the way that literary texts make the world new, *make* it, and necessarily make it different, however minimally, from what is – the literary text recreates the world as *other* to itself (not least, of course, in remaking it just as a certain selection of words in a certain order). If the originary human thought is suicidal – the wrenching, anguished mental cry or grunt that things, including life itself, could be otherwise – we might see this originary thought as also the origin of a thinking that leads eventually to the often lengthy, complex, and mostly indirect versions of the phrase 'things could be otherwise' that is constituted by a poem, play, novel, or story. It is a thought that we encounter, for example, in that most distinguished, most cited, most influential, least avoidable of works, Shakespeare's

Hamlet – in a play, in other words, that also, however, directly and concisely articulates just such a thought. The thought that one might die in order that things might be otherwise is expressed, of course, in Hamlet's famous soliloquy, and in fact in literature's most famous, most quotable, most cited line: when Hamlet asks whether he should 'be' or not 'be', he is expressing exactly the originary thought that Dienstag imagines. Hamlet is expressing the thought of his own death, the thought of killing himself in order to escape the prolonged and intolerable mental anguish that (at that point, at least) is all that there is to his life.

'The aim of all life': From Schopenhauer to Freud

One of the primary tasks of philosophical pessimism, then, has been to elaborate reasons not to end one's life just because pessimism seems ineluctably to call for such an end. In undertaking this task, philosophical pessimism explores the rationale for ending one's life and, indeed, comes to the conclusion that the desire for death is a fundamental dimension of what it means to be human, what it means even, as a human, to live, to be alive. Schopenhauer and Freud, two of the most prominent and influential of philosophical pessimists, talk about the 'aim' of life precisely in these terms. In the penultimate chapter of *The World as Will and Representation*, for example, Schopenhauer proposes that there is 'only one inborn error', the idea that 'we exist in order to be happy', and argues that dying is 'the real aim of life'. 'At the moment of dying', Schopenhauer argues, 'everything is decided which through the whole course of life was only prepared and introduced'. What we universally and inescapably discover at the point of death, he proposes, is that everything we strive for – in other words, that which is life itself, the effort of living – has been 'a vain, fruitless, and self-contradictory effort, to have returned from which is a deliverance' (*WWR* 2:634, 637). In Dienstag's formulation, Schopenhauer's reasoning suggests that death is 'the ultimate expression of the meaning of our lives' or, more accurately, of 'the absence of meaning of our lives': for Schopenhauer, the meaning of our lives is, in the end, precisely nothing other than 'the gradual realization of the absence of such meaning' (*PPES* 102).

It is important to note, as I say, that actual suicide – what Schopenhauer calls 'the arbitrary doing away with an individual phenomenon' – is not in his view the solution to the problem of life (*WWR* 1:399): for Schopenhauer, to posit suicide as the consummate and resolving action of life would only be to emphasize the vanity of human existence. Suicide is fundamentally paradoxical – the ultimate expression of the will even in the attempt to

escape the will. What Freud will call the 'death drive' is, for Schopenhauer an expression of the desire for willlessness, the absence of individual human will. And yet, paradoxically, suicide is precisely an expression or assertion of an individual's will (the will to be dead) (*WWR* 1:398–9).[24] Schopenhauer makes two forceful arguments about suicide. Firstly, in an essay on suicide largely devoted to refuting the standard religio-ethical condemnation of suicide in post-Augustinian Christianity, he generalizes the act by proposing that suicidality, the thought of suicide, is in fact a fundamental feature of human existence: according to Schopenhauer, there is perhaps 'no one alive who would not already have made an end of his life' if ending was understood to be 'something purely negative, a sudden cessation of existence'. But because the 'destruction of the body' is involved and because the body is precisely 'the phenomenon of the will-to-life', people are by and large deterred (*PP* 2:210). Secondly, in an earlier consideration of the question in *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer makes the apparently self-contradictory claim that, rather than embodying a *denial* of the will, suicide is 'a phenomenon of the will's strong affirmation'. The assertion is only superficially paradoxical, however: Schopenhauer's point is that the suicide 'wills life' but not *this* life, not the life with which the suicide has been presented. The suicide wills an *other* life just in the act of self-slaughter, and wills that alternative life even to the extent that *this* life, the life that is given, is annihilated. For Schopenhauer, the suicide in fact 'wills the unchecked existence and affirmation of the body' that he is denied by the restrictions that circumstances place on him and that, as a result cause him 'great suffering' (*WWR* 1:398).[25] In fact, Schopenhauer considers actual or completed suicide, the act that ends the self, to be counterproductive, if not even absurd: life itself, for Schopenhauer, can be defined in terms of the 'will-to-live'. Since suffering is 'essential to life', he argues, the 'arbitrary destruction of an individual phenomenon' can be understood as 'a quite futile and foolish act' because the 'thing-in-itself' (the general, universal Will) remains 'unaffected' by the act – like a rainbow that remains 'unmoved, however rapidly the drops may change which sustain it for the moment' (*WWR* 1:399). The successful or completed act of suicide, in this sense, is an epiphenomenon, the foam on the surface of human existence.

Freud's position on suicide is not unrelated. As Eric Plaut has observed, there are few references to suicide in Freud's work, but far more to the *idea* of suicide, to suicide ideation.[26] And yet as Karl Menninger argues, for psychoanalysis, aggression, and therefore ultimately aggression of the subject towards itself, appears to be endemic in humanity: 'the relentlessness of self-destruction never ceases', Menninger declares at the end of his suggestively

titled *Man against Himself*.[27] And Robert Litman even suggests that, for Freud, there are 'general features of the human condition' that make 'each individual person somewhat vulnerable to suicide'.[28] One way in which Freud accounts for this vulnerability is to turn the subject against itself, a paradox that he noted in his brief 'concluding remarks' on the 1910 meeting of the Psychoanalytic Society in Vienna that focused on suicide: 'we have not reached a decision on the problem that interests us', Freud remarks, noting that what remains to be understood is how the 'extraordinarily powerful life instinct' can be 'overcome' and hinting that the 'condition of melancholia' will constitute a 'starting point'.[29] In these highly attenuated remarks (he only manages seven sentences), Freud does in fact outline the two dimensions of the question that he later pursues. In the first place, there is the question of aggression turned in on the subject: self-aggression. The point is elaborated helpfully in his 1920 study, 'The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman', where Freud argues that the 'enigma' of suicide can be explained in terms of the individual 'killing an object with whom he has identified himself' and 'turning against himself a death-wish which had been directed against someone else'.[30] Subsequently, in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), he rises to almost poetic eloquence in an evocation of this self-involved violence of the psyche against itself. Melancholia, Freud argues, can be understood as an 'excessively strong super-ego which has obtained a hold upon consciousness' and that 'rages against the ego with merciless violence'. In this scenario, he goes on, 'the destructive component' has 'entrenched itself in the super-ego and turned against the ego': 'what is now holding sway in the super-ego is, as it were, a pure culture of the death instinct' that can in fact succeed in 'driving the ego into death'.[31]

The second dimension of what we might call Freud's theory of suicide has to do with an innate self-destructiveness. As early as 1901, in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, he had argued that if we accept the phenomenon of 'half-intentional self-*injury*' then we must also recognize 'half-intentional self-*destruction* (self-destruction with an unconscious intention)', which uses 'a threat to life' that is disguised as a 'chance mishap'. Freud suggests that such events are neither fully unintentional nor rare, since 'the trend to self-destruction is present to a certain degree in very many more human beings than those in whom it is carried out'.[32] This idea of self-destructiveness later feeds into Freud's decisive if highly speculative account of the 'death drive' in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920). The essay, perhaps Freud's most incisive and comprehensive discussion of suicide and parasuicide, develops Schopenhauer's claim in *The World as Will and Representation* that the 'real aim' of life is to die, and

even borrows the phrase from his nineteenth-century precursor. In this essay, Freud moves decisively away from prominent degenerationist suicide theorists such as S. A. K. Strahan. In his 1893 book *Suicide and Insanity*, Strahan had articulated the commonly held view that an 'innate love of life', an 'all-pervading . . . instinctive straining after life', an 'instinct of self-preservation' characterizes not only animal but organic nature generally.[33] In Strahan's Darwinian formulation, 'the absence of this fundamental instinct . . . is *per se* irrefragable proof of unfitness to life' such that suicide ('voluntary death') is 'merely one of the eliminative processes of natural selection'.[34] By the time he came to write 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', Freud had reached the conclusion, by contrast, that the wish, desire, or impulse towards death is both a more general and active or positive feature of existence, and that the death instinct or *Thanatos* is ceaselessly and mostly silently at work against the 'life instinct' (*Eros*).[35] As part of what he refers to as 'speculation, often far-fetched speculation', Freud argues that working against the 'hypothesis of the self-preservative instincts' is the counteracting instinct of the 'death drive' and indeed that 'instinctual life as a whole serves to bring about death'.[36] Freud famously qualifies this stark analysis by asserting that every organism 'wishes to die only in its own fashion', indicating a fundamental paradox: if the aim of all life is death, then that might seem to entail an immediate resort to suicide. But organisms do not, in the general run of things, commit suicide. The paradox is resolved, in the first place, by *Eros*, or the life instinct, which ensures that the 'living organism' will tend to struggle 'most energetically against events . . . which might help it to attain its life's aim rapidly'.[37]

In an illuminating discussion of Freud's wildly speculative theory, however, Robert Roland Smith argues against any conceptual operation that would simply conflate the death drive with suicide. For Smith, the death drive can be understood to involve an unconscious desire for a 'simple state of inertia' that is 'closer to preservation than annihilation' – closer to a certain kind of tranquil torpor, in other words, than is represented by the act of suicide. In fact, for Smith, suicide may even be said to fall 'outside the bailiwick of the death-drive'.[38] By this curious logic, the instincts for self-preservation are 'identical with' the death instincts:

> Death furnishes the goal of life in general, for life in general takes the form of the pursuit of pleasure, and pleasure results from the quietening of tension to the point of surcease . . . Put at its most tautologous: life, that is pleasure, seeks death, that is pleasure, that is life.[39]

And yet within this equation, suicide 'would annul once and for all the possibility of seeking pleasure, that is death'; suicide paradoxically works

against death in this sense or, at least, against the death drive, since it would *curtail* the pleasure of an ending that the organism necessarily seeks. In fact, as the act that 'abolishes the tendency that prompts it', Smith argues, suicide threatens to 'undermine the whole theoretical edifice of psychoanalysis', which is ultimately founded upon the idea of wish fulfilment.[40] Indeed, since psychoanalysis conceives of suicide as a form of aggression towards *another*, 'purely speaking' it would be 'psychoanalytically impossible' and can only be understood as a 'regressive act of sadism performed "mistakenly" on the self'[41].

Nevertheless, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' can be said to offer a powerful vocabulary and a rigorous if alarming logic for a thinking of suicide. There is a sense in which Freud's essay raises, without finally being able to answer them, certain ineluctable questions – not 'why do certain people kill themselves?' but instead, 'why do some people, most people, *not* kill themselves?' together with the associated questions, 'what is it that stops us doing so?', and 'how is it possible to avoid suicide?'. Building on Freud's theory of the 'death-instinct', these are questions that Karl Menninger poses at the beginning of what is probably the most carefully developed analysis of suicide that psychoanalysis has allowed itself, his 1938 book *Man against Himself*. 'If at heart we all want to die', Menninger asks, 'why do so many of us struggle against it as we do, why do not all of us commit suicide . . . why does the wish to live *ever*, even temporarily, triumph over the wish to die?'[42] A further paradox that Menninger points to concerns the way that the self-negating act of suicide can also be conceived of as a form of what he calls 'propitiation': one punishes oneself in killing oneself and punishes oneself, even, paradoxically, *for* the murderous act of killing oneself. Menninger elaborates the psychoanalytic position that suicide is always an act of violence, always undertaken by an individual who is, in the final analysis, 'dominated' by the 'impulse . . . to kill' another. According to this logic, suicide 'represents in one act a murder and a propitiation', since in the unconscious 'murder alone justifies in the unconscious the death penalty'.[43] There is a highly efficient economy of justice in this logic of suicide, in other words, since by killing oneself, one literally at the same time commits the crime for which one is being punished – there is no temporal priority here, the act of propitiation being collapsed into the act for which propitiation is (will be) sought.

From Romantic to Victorian Cultures of Suicide

The troubled and conflicted analyses of suicide that Schopenhauerean philosophy and Freudian psychoanalysis undertake are themselves part of

an increasingly secularized and normalized configuration of suicide of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such discourses respond to and shape an emerging social, legal, and cultural legitimisation of the act, and at the same time register the suffering, regret, trauma, and denial that it inevitably entails. The extreme and deeply traumatic event of suicide begins to take on a certain aspect of the ordinary in the early twentieth century, and nowhere more so than in the discourse of literature. It is possible to argue that by this time there has been a major shift in cultural understandings of suicide in the West towards the emergence of an acceptance of the act – or at least an acceptance of the thought of the act – as, in a sense, a critical, indeed unavoidable dimension of human life.

The word 'suicide' is usually attributed to Sir Thomas Browne, who coins it in *Religio Medici* (1643) to replace the more overtly condemnatory vocabulary of homicide, slaughter, and murder ('self-slaughter', 'self-murder', 'self-homicide').[44] Rowland Wymer points out that a few decades earlier, in what is often taken to be the first literary representation of a fully articulated 'modern' subjectivity, Hamlet is prompted by an argument from 'within' to kill himself – or not to: 'Thus conscience does make cowards', he concludes (*Hamlet* 3.i.82) – rather than being driven, as would conventionally have been the case, by 'an evil angel or a personified Despair'.[45] Subsequently, however, the cultural understanding of suicide is, as the historian Michael MacDonald argues, 'transformed utterly': between about 1660 and 1800, coroners' verdicts of 'suicidal' deaths substantially shifted from *felo de se* to *non compos mentis*, with the latter increasing from 8.4 percent of verdicts in the 1660s to 97 percent by the end of the eighteenth century.[46] While what amounts to an epistemic shift in the cultural representation of suicide seems not to have involved developments in medical science itself (physicians made 'no notable contributions to the understanding of suicide in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries', according to MacDonald), the *non compos mentis* verdict has itself been described as 'the most important manifestation of the secularization of suicide'.[47] Reflecting the legal shift in emphasis, the physician William Rowley argued in 1788 that 'every one who commits suicide is indubitably *non compos mentis*' and that suicide should 'ever be considered an act of insanity'.[48] As has long been recognized, this change in the standard legal verdict on self-killing occurs alongside the rise of possessive individualism, the growing importance of the idea or ideology of personal happiness, the decline in the explanatory power of superstition and a growing suspicion of religious enthusiasm, the spread of literacy and the expansion of the periodical press, and new 'Enlightenment' philosophies and legal and economic

discourses and practices such as contractualism and utilitarianism.[49] As MacDonald argues, the 'reversal' should be understood in terms of a Protestant resistance to Catholic accounts of divine or supernatural intervention in human affairs, a move towards human and natural rather than spiritual or demonic explanation.[50] And as the anti-suicide advocate Jennifer Michael Hecht points out, the new individualism has, 'built right into it', a 'mechanism' that allowed individuals to 'judge their own lives, possibly to find them without value or worth, and to end them'.[51]

The eighteenth century, then, witnessed a fundamental transformation in the social and cultural understanding of an act that Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755) defines as 'self-murder; the horrid crime of destroying one's self'.[52] In the first place, with a move from a 'cosmological' to an ethical conception of self-killing, a more personalized, transgressive, and culturally and politically dissident conception of suicide emerges, one that collapses the ancient tradition of noble or heroic suicide (what Émile Durkheim calls 'altruistic' or 'fatalistic' suicide) into the individual who commits suicide for love, for artistic integrity, or indeed for philosophical or existential despair (Durkheim's 'egotistic' or 'anomic' suicide).[53] While the standard eighteenth-century line on suicide as a crime against *God* is articulated in poems such as Thomas Warton's ode 'The Suicide' (1777), it can be said that the Romantic period was inaugurated by a series of 'literary' suicides that involved a rebellion against *society* – the suicide of the victimized poet in Thomas Gray's 'The Bard' (1757), the apparent suicide in 1770 of the neglected Bristol poet Thomas Chatterton (a crucial model for English Romantic artistic identity), and the love-melancholic suicide of the eponymous protagonist of Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774).[54] In each case, whether performed by artist or lover, the act of suicide expresses a sense of 'betrayal and alienation' towards bourgeois society, a fundamental rejection of its values in what Zilla Gabrielle Cahn calls a 'dramatic gesture of utter disdain'.[55] Indeed, it is possible to see the Romantic culture of posterity as itself implicitly or incipiently suicidal in the way that it links canonicity with an author's own death, even while, as J. A. Hiddleston comments, such configurations of suicide confirm one's sense that such suicides are accomplished 'not so much to die, but paradoxically to live on in some mode or other'.[56] Romanticism's most influential representations of suicide therefore present the act as a 'sentimental' gesture of ultimate artistic freedom,[57] a gesture perhaps most iconically represented in Casper David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), with its sublime suggestion of a dramatic leap from the cliffs on which the wanderer stands. Responding to the death of Thomas Chatterton as the archetypal

suicide of a neglected genius, poems such as five of Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784), Mary Robinson's 'Monody for the Memory of Chatterton' (1791), Coleridge's 'Monody on the Death of Chatterton' (1794), Wordsworth's 'Resolution and Independence' (1802), and Keats's *Endymion* (1818), as well as Alfred de Vigny's play *Chatterton* (1835), all in their different ways celebrate the alienated poet's sublimation into a kind of transcendental annihilation. And there are plenty of examples of the importance of 'sentimental' suicide in the work of the canonical Romantic poets.[58] In Smith's 'Sonnet: On Being Cautioned against Walking on a Headland Overlooking the Sea, Because it was Frequented by a Lunatic' (1784), for example, the speaker views the 'solitary wretch' who with 'wild and hollow eyes' stands on the edge of a cliff and measures the distance to the rocks below 'more with envy than with fear'. Byron's 'Euthanasia' (1812), *The Giaour* (lines 422–38) (1813), *Manfred* (1817), 'The Island' (1823), 'On this Day I Complete my Thirty-Sixth Year' (1824), 'Isles of Greece'/Canto 3 of *Don Juan* (1819), and 'Sardanapolous' (1821), and Keats's 'Why Did I Laugh Tonight', 'Ode to a Nightingale', and 'Ode on Melancholy' (all 1819) all identify forms of the death drive and of suicidality with high artistic ambition. Percy Bysshe Shelley, perhaps the most melodramatically suicidal of the major Romantic poets, seems to court suicide and to express suicidality as much in life as in poetry. Both 'Alastor' (1816) and 'Adonais' (1821) link artistic identity and the death drive; the thinly veiled autobiographical speaker in 'The Serpent Is Shut out from Paradise' (1819) contemplates suicide; and in the fragment 'The False Laurel and the True' (1821), the speaker emphasizes the fact that the laurel that he wears is itself poisonous. 'Is suicide wrong?' Shelley asks Thomas Jefferson Hogg in 1811 ('I slept with a loaded pistol & some poison last night but did not die', he goes on). Eleven years later, in June 1822, he asks Edward Trelawny to obtain some prussic acid for him: 'I have no intention of suicide at present', he assures his friend, but says that it would nevertheless be a 'comfort' to have in his possession 'that golden key to the chamber of perpetual rest'.[59]

By contrast, however, and responding to such developments as advances in experimental science, the increasing prestige of rational argumentation, the decline in feudalism, and the growth of possessive individualism and secularism that are themselves implicitly or explicitly articulated in the writings of such Enlightenment thinkers as Voltaire, d'Holbach, Cesare Beccaria, and David Hume, the decision to commit suicide comes to seem, under certain circumstances, an increasingly reasonable and indeed ethical response to sociopolitical or personal circumstances.[60] By beginning to

reframe suicide as a personal and psychological question, the Enlightenment also inaugurated an era in which the act's 'purely human causes' are investigated by means of the discourses of medicine, psychiatry, and psychology, as melancholia and disorders of the self are increasingly understood to be functions of the brain and nervous system.[61] Characters in eighteenth-century novels 'kill themselves by the hundred with not a word of authorial reproach', Georges Minois comments, only slightly overstating the case.[62] And as Kelly McGuire argues, the modern discourse of suicide emerges 'coterminously with the development of the novel as a dominant literary form', wherein characters increasingly 'define themselves' by 'acts of self-extinction'. The increase in the cultural prominence of suicide in eighteenth-century narratives is thus understood as contingent upon the era's emphasis on bourgeois individualism and on the development of the 'modern' sense of autonomous subjecthood on which the novel feeds and that the form itself promulgates.[63] As society weakens its 'collective force' over its subjects, Durkheim will argue at the end of the next century, individuals are 'admitted as masters of their own destinies', such that, ineluctably, it is the individual's 'privilege' to end his or her life: 'excessive individuation leads to suicide', he declares.[64] In Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet's implicit syllogism, 'modernity results in individualism, and individualism results in suicide' (therefore modernity leads to suicide).[65] Conceived of as an 'intentional, knowing act of the self against itself', suicide may be said to 'require the formation of a reflexive subject' in the seventeenth and eighteen centuries.[66] Thus, in addition to Joseph Addison's popular and influential play *Cato* (1712), Daniel Defoe's meditation on what Jacques Derrida calls 'a sort of logic of automatic self-destruction' that 'organizes the whole of Robinson [Crusoe]'s discourse',[67] Samuel Richardson's ground-breaking novel *Clarissa* (1748), and Goethe's epoch-making *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), suicide features, for example, in Charlotte Smith's *Desmond* (1792) and Fanny Burney's *Cecilia* (1782), *Camilla* (1796), and *The Wanderer* (1814). And it is particularly prominent in the novels of Mary Shelley, daughter of a famous suicide, half-sister of an obscure one, and wife of an at least parasuicidal poet (whose first wife, Harriet, had killed herself after he eloped with Mary): the monster promises to kill himself at the end of *Frankenstein* (1816), while Frankenstein himself continues his suicidal search for the creature he has made; in *Mathilda* (1819), the protagonist's father kills himself after confessing his incestuous love for his daughter; and in *The Last Man* (1826), Perdita's suicide is an expression of apocalyptic despair.[68] Suicide also becomes increasingly politicized and is increasingly conceived of even as a revolutionary or

'Jacobin' act, after the laws punishing suicides were essentially rescinded by the revolutionary government in France in 1790 – although it depicts a murder, Jacques-Louis David's *The Death of Marat* (1793) might be read as the iconic painting of French revolutionary political suicide, inasmuch as the position of the martyred Marat is indistinguishable from a suicide and in the sense that martyrdom, whether political or religious, can never be detached from a certain suicidality.[69] More generally, the democratizing and radicalizing impulse in Romantic and post-Romantic poetry is highly attuned to suicide as a political and economic function of or response to poverty, despair, political and social oppression, abandonment, or cultural shame. Indeed, the historian Olive Anderson has pointed to the success of what she calls 'sentimental radicalism' in making the suicide appear to be 'part of the wider social problem of poverty' by the early 1840s.[70] In addition to Wordsworth's early poem 'Argument for Suicide' (1796/7) (which is in some ways answered by Coleridge's anti-suicide poem from 1811, 'The Suicide's Argument') at least eight of the poems in the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* – 'The Female Vagrant', 'The Mad Mother', 'Ruth', 'The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman', 'Ellen Irwin', 'The Idiot Boy', 'The Brothers', ''Tis said, some have died for love' – make a point of engaging with or representing socially, economically, and ideologically determined acts of suicide and suicidal thoughts.[71] The politically radical version of suicide is perhaps most fully articulated in an epic poem by the Chartist writer Thomas Cooper, *Purgatory of Suicides* (1845), which 'questions whether life is worth living in a world so rife with oppression and cruelty' while at the same time arguing against suicide and for social and political change.[72] And suicide, particularly female suicide, subsequently features in a huge range of popular and ballad-style poems published in newspapers and magazines, as well as in major Victorian poems such as Thomas Hood's well-known 'The Bridge of Sighs' (1844) and Matthew Arnold's early poems 'Courage' and 'Empedocles on Etna' (both 1852).[73] The eventual poet laureate, Alfred Tennyson, can be considered the suicide poet of the age, with a lifelong tally of at least twenty-six poems – including 'Mariana' (1830), 'Supposed Confessions of a Second-Rate Mind' (1830), The Two Voices' (originally titled 'Thoughts of a Suicide') (1833), 'Ulysses' (1833), *Maud* (1855), 'Lucretius' (1868), and the pointedly titled 'Despair' (1881) – engaging with forms of suicide or suicide ideation.[74] James Thomson's despondent *City of Dreadful Night* (1870–4) is premised not only on the death-driven desire for 'dateless oblivion and divine repose' but also on the suicidal idea that 'you are free to end [your life] when you will'.[75] And George Meredith's sonnet sequence *Modern Love* (1862) reflects the poet's despair after his wife left

him in 1858 for the painter Henry Wallis, whose best-known painting is his portrait of the suicided Thomas Chatterton (1856), for which Meredith himself had modelled as the doomed eighteenth-century poet. Predictably enough perhaps, *Modern Love* culminates in and resolves itself through the poet's suicidal thoughts being projected onto the speaker's wife, who does indeed kill herself.[76]

Suicide and attempted and contemplated suicide also become regular narrative cruxes in the Victorian realist novel. The plots of both *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Wuthering Heights* (1847) depend, in ways that are at once unmistakeable and often overlooked, on the suicides of key individuals (in *Jane Eyre*, there is John Reed, the dissolute suicide; Bertha Mason, the mad suicide; and St John Rivers, the self-sacrificial parasuicide; in *Wuthering Heights*, both Cathy and Heathcliff are the suicidally self-destructive characters), and suicides are prominent in a number of Charles Dickens's novels, including Nancy in *Oliver Twist* (1837–9), Mr Mantalini and Ralph Nickleby in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–9), Jonas in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–4), Tom Jarndyce and Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House* (1852–3), Dombey and Carter in *Dombey and Son* (1848), and Merdle in *Little Dorrit* (1855–7). Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), *Pierre* (1852), and *Bartleby the Scrivener* (1853) all revolve around suicides or potential suicides, and August Melmotte's suicide constitutes the culminating act in Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1875). Suicide also haunts the nineteenth-century European novel, most famously in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* (1872), and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1878), but also, for example, in the novels of Honoré de Balzac (which include as many as twenty-one suicides),[77] Victor Hugo (suicide is 'so widespread' in his novels as to constitute a 'defining feature'),[78] and Georges Sand (in whose novels suicides are 'plentiful' according to the French criminologist Louis Proal).[79] But it is in the late nineteenth century that what the Italian physician Enrico Morselli refers to as the 'suicidal epidemic of our age' leads to an explosion in medical and sociological studies as well as in literary representations of the act.[80] Suicide figures large in *fin de siècle* gothic: in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Jekyll is, as an Anglo-French understanding of his name suggests, a suicide (*je (me)* kill),[81] and in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), it is not only the rejected Sibyll Vane who commits suicide but also Dorian himself when he destroys the picture that Hallward has painted of him. Suicide features regularly in stories by Luigi Pirandello written between 1896 and 1935 and by Guy De Maupassant (who has an 1880 short story titled 'Suicides'). It plays a major role in Henrik Ibsen's *The Warriors at*

Helgeland (1858), *Brand* (1867), *The Wild Duck* (1884), *Rosemerholm* (1886), *Ghosts* (1881), *Hedda Gabler* (1890), *The Master Builder* (1892), and *When We Dead Awaken* (1899) – in all of which characters make concerted efforts to end their lives. Kate Chopin's proto-feminist *The Awakening* (1899) culminates in the death-by-drowning of its protagonist, and suicide ambiguously resolves Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) when Lily Bart takes an overdose and dies.[82] Suicide is a major feature of British fiction of the late Victorian and Edwardian period, appearing prominently in at least sixteen of Henry James's novels and short stories,[83] while in Thomas Hardy's fiction there is an 'unparalleled gallery of suicides and self-destructive characters'[84] including Boldwood in *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), Eustacia Vye in *The Return of the Native* (1878), Michael Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), Giles Winterborne in *The Woodlanders* (1887), Tess Durbeyfield in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), and Jude Fawley in *Jude the Obscure* (1895); and there is a 'prodigious' number of suicides in Joseph Conrad's fiction – a higher rate, according to one critic, than in the work of 'any other major novelist writing in English' – as many as seventeen, including in *Lord Jim* (1900), 'The End of the Tether' (1902), *Nostromo* (1904), *The Secret Agent* (1907), *Chance* (1913), and *Victory* (1915).[85]

Medical and Sociological Discourses at the Turn of the Century

In *Diary of a Writer* (1873–81), Dostoevsky notes that suicide has become 'epidemic', and by the end of the nineteenth century, what in his 1891 novel *New Grub Street* George Gissing calls 'the simple longing for extinction' has come to be seen as a 'universal plague' or a *cultural* 'mania'.[86] Thus, an 1882 review of the English translation of Enrico Morselli's *Suicide: An Essay on Comparative Moral Statistics* in the widely read journal *Science* argues that the book is propitious in its timing since 'a great suicidal wave' seems to be 'sweeping over our social horizon'.[87] Writers and thinkers begin to talk about 'the universal appetite for calm' and about 'the coming universal wish not to live' (in Thomas Hardy's famous phrase from *Jude the Obscure* (1895)) and, as we have seen, in Freud's Schopenhauerian formulation in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', about the idea that 'the aim of all life is death'.[88] The 'degeneration' that Max Nordau analyses as the modern condition in his influential 1892 book of that name is securely linked to suicide by such writers as the French criminologist Louis Proal, who claims in a 1900 study that the act has become 'the disease of the century', and the British statistician Reginald Skelton who refers (also in 1900) to 'the present abnormal extent of suicide'.[89] As Stjepan Meštroić has argued, suicide is 'one of

the most important *fin de siècle* themes in literature' and becomes a key question in medical and sociological scholarship of the period.[90] Writing sixty years before Nordau, Proal, and Skelton, the physician and psychiatrist Forbes Winslow had set the tone by arguing in his widely read and ground-breaking medical analysis *The Anatomy of Suicide* (1840), that the 'crime' of suicide is spreading along with, and as a result of, the 'general diffusion of knowledge' and education, 'civilization', and indeed socialism. Winslow argues that 'in proportion as the intellect becomes expanded' and 'knowledge and civilization diffused, the desire to commit self-murder' is itself 'engendered', since it is 'an indisputable fact, that insanity, and all its variations, is in a ratio to the refinement and civilization of a country'.[91] In his study of the 'moral statistics' of suicide, Morselli categorically states that rates increase 'amongst people according to their degree of civilization'.[92] Skelton offers a similar analysis when he lists the social and cultural causes of the increase in rates: civilization multiplies individuals' desires without satisfying them; industrialization has been culturally and economically disadvantageous for the working classes; wages have not kept up with increases in the cost of living; the 'extension of education' has led to social dissatisfaction and to the weakening of 'religious sentiment'; newspapers and magazines exacerbate human vanity, and the 'prospect of celebrity' is, for the suicide, 'often a more powerful argument' than 'even the instinct of self-preservation'.[93] As Howard Kushner has argued, by the late nineteenth century, the connection between modernity and suicide had simply become part of accepted 'common sense'. 'It is difficult to imagine how Europeans or Americans could have read suicide statistics in any way other than one which reinforced their preconceptions' about the enervating and corrupting influence of industrialization, mass-media, education, and 'civilization', Kushner argues.[94] And yet it was also possible to consider suicide in relation to social and cultural prestige. Writing in 1864, for example, the prominent American writer and professor of medical jurisprudence John Ordronaux had contended that 'the progress of civilization is everywhere accompanied' by an increase in insanity, a major if not exclusive precursor to suicide, and that over-educated individuals with 'refined natures', 'gifted minds', 'highly developed nervous systems', and a 'morbid sensitiveness of feeling' are particularly prone to killing themselves.[95] Thirty years later, Durkheim similarly posits that the 'suicide of sadness' is 'an endemic state among civilised peoples' and contends that the 'organic-psychic temperament most predisposing man to kill himself is neurasthenia', a condition that, in contemporary 'refined' societies where 'nervous members constitute almost a nobility', is more 'a mark of distinction than a

weakness'.[96] Looking back from the 1930s, Walter Benjamin follows such analyses by arguing that it is urban modernity (or 'modernism') that encourages or entails suicide. Benjamin suggests that for Baudelaire in the 1840s and 1850s, it is 'understandable' that someone who 'becomes exhausted . . . takes refuge in death . . . Modernity must stand under the sign of suicide', an act that is 'not resignation but heroic passion'. Suicide is '*the* achievement of modernism in the realm of the passions', the *'passion particulière de la vie moderne*', he declares.[97]

Alongside such sociological analyses of the perceived suicide epidemic as a function of 'civilization', the medicalization of suicide was unrelenting in the nineteenth century. Early in the century, French doctors sought to discover the 'organ' of suicide (if necessary by the dissection of suicide corpses),[98] and in 1818 the phrenologist J. C. Spurzheim proposed that suicide is a 'corporeal disease', noting that the skulls of suicides who have suffered from 'chronic melancholy' are often 'dense like ivory, and often thick'.[99] More generally, there was an increasingly accepted assumption by the medical and legal professions as well as by the general public that suicide must be caused by insanity. In *An Inquiry into Certain Errors Relative to Insanity* (1820), the physician George Man Burrows argues that suicide is 'generally ascribed to the effect of a distempered mind',[100] while Jean-Étiene Esquirol declares the following year that 'a man does not attempt to end his days except in delirium' and that 'suicides are insane'.[101] As I have noted, by the end of the eighteenth century, as many as 97% of suicide verdicts in the English courts had declared the individual to be *non compos mentis*, implicitly defining suicide as, by definition, a 'psychiatric calamity'.[102] Andreas Bähr has argued that the context for the gradual decriminalization of suicide in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is a 'conflict-laden and multi-layered interplay of theological, philosophical, medical and juridical discourses' with evolving political, cultural, and social practices.[103] But a crucial dimension of this shift is the medicalization of suicide. Victorian discourses of suicide are marked most prominently by medical diagnosis.

Zilla Gabrielle Cahn has forcefully argued that while suicide for the Romantics tended to denote a 'great dramatic gesture of heroic rebellion', the increasing medicalization of suicide in the nineteenth century resulted in a reaction against the gesture and along with deep suspicion of its efficacy and indeed morality: far from cultural prestige, for many commentators, suicide comes to denote cowardice, degeneration, and immorality, while 'stoical acceptance' becomes the new heroism.[104] In Barbara Gates's estimation, therefore, the characteristic Victorian response to suicide is to 'deeply

fear' it, to conceal it 'whenever possible', and to regard the act as both 'other' and as 'subversive'.[105] Reconceived as a function primarily of insanity, suicide regains its place in the public imagination as a source of 'anxiety and disgrace'.[106] If bourgeois individualism was the context for a new suicidality in eighteenth-century culture, in the Victorian period its resistance to 'bohemian' culture and to the politically radical values of an earlier revolutionary age produces a distinct antipathy towards the act, and Olive Anderson argues that 'nowhere in mid-Victorian England . . . did the attitude prevail that suicide was glamorous, courageous, or right'.[107] For Barbara Gates, Carlyle's Teufelsdröckh is a paradigm of the Victorian resistance to suicide: as she points out, the hero of *Sartor Resartus* (1830) renounces suicide for an apparently similar but, in fact, opposing renunciation – what Carlyle calls the 'first preliminary moral Act, Annihilation of self', an annihilation that in fact destroys the implicit or perceived *egotism* of suicide. The move is from adolescent despair to mature self-renunciation.[108]

By mid-century, then, the governing medical and legal presumption is that the suicide is, by definition, insane, temporarily or otherwise, and one historian asserts the 'pure' medical understanding of suicide to have been unusual before 1835.[109] Roy Baumeister has pointed out that this judgement is often in fact tautological in the sense that suicide is itself proof of insanity, and yet, as Ian Marsh has argued, the diagnosis also brings the suicide under a 'regime of truth', one that centres on 'the production and maintenance of a compulsory ontology of pathology.[110] During the nineteenth century, the medico-legal judgement of 'temporary insanity' becomes a socially accepted norm, so much so that by 1857, George Henry Lewes is moved to describe the conventional verdict as a form of 'casuistry'.[111] In an unsigned review of A. Brierre de Boismont's *On Suicide and Suicidal Insanity* (Paris, 1856) in Forbes Winslow's *The Journal of Psychological Medicine and Mental Pathology*, for example, the author commends de Boismont for clearly distinguishing between 'the suicide of a madman and the self-murder of the responsible being', commenting sceptically that while once suicide was 'a title to honour' and later 'a deadly sin', now it is almost universally classed as 'a disease': 'One thing is certain', the reviewer argues, 'suicide is essentially and above all a psychological question'.[112] By the mid-nineteenth century, as Ian Marsh argues, suicide has come to be seen as 'always already pathological'.[113]

As we begin to see, however, during the nineteenth century, suicide is also 'one of the first conducts to enter into the sphere of sociological analysis'.[114] Indeed, by the late nineteenth century an increasing scepticism towards a totalizing medical explanation has led to a developing sense that

the act can be understood as a sociocultural phenomenon, and that it is a 'normal' or 'natural' part of human life.[115] In an 1892 article on 'Suicide in Simple Melancholy', for example, the prominent alienist Henry Maudsley argues that the act can be considered 'a natural event of the human dispensation, just a necessary incident from time to time of the course of its organic evolutions and dissolutions, and no more out of keeping' than 'any other mode of death'; for some, suicide is 'natural in motive and logical in fact', he argues, 'the remedy for the malady of life which has become unsupportable'.[116] Similarly, in *Sanity and Insanity* (1890), the leading forensic psychiatrist Charles Mercier describes suicide as under some circumstances a 'natural and ready way out of intolerable misery', the 'natural and quasi-normal course to take', and in some cases an 'outgrowth and . . . non-essential excrescence on the fungus of melancholia'.[117] A decade earlier, in his influential book on the new science of evolutionary ethics *The Science of Ethics* (1882), Leslie Stephen, the critic, editor, and father of Virginia Woolf, had argued that if a suicide does not influence others negatively, he may in fact be said to be 'diminishing the sum of human misery' by his act and that if the act springs from a 'lofty' motive 'I can see no ground for disapproving of it'.[118] Indeed, one of the fundamental breaks with tradition that Émile Durkheim makes in the inaugural work in the 'new science' of sociology, his influential study of suicide, is with medicine: rather than an exceptional function of insanity per se, suicide emerges as a phenomenon more generally open to social and cultural analysis.[119]

In these competing contexts, the question repeatedly raised by physicians, psychiatrists, sociologists, philosophers and other experts is whether, as Reginald Skelton puts it, suicide should be considered as 'merely a spasmodic individual occurrence' or as connected with 'society and its actual institutions'.[120] David Stoff and John Mann have argued that the nineteenth century saw a major shift from 'theological, moral, philosophical and legal' explanations of suicide to conceptions of the act in 'social, medical, psychological, and statistical' terms, such that the sociological and the psychological remain the 'two main threads for the contemporary study of suicide'.[121] It is this crux or crisis of explanation that the present book explores in relation to twentieth-century literary discourse – the two ends of the telescope (in the writer Tim Lott's metaphor) of society and the individual.[122] As the twentieth century begins, two major paradigms for suicidal behaviour are emerging that will shape and direct discussion over the coming decades – symbolized by Durkheim's account of suicide as a function of societal forces, on the one hand, and Sigmund Freud's account of the aetiology of suicide as primarily psychical on the other.

The sociologization of suicide was promoted most forcefully and influentially in the 'masterpiece of nineteenth-century statistical sociology', Durkheim's 1897 *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, a work that sought simultaneously to comprehend suicide sociologically and to (thereby) establish a new discipline.[123] Durkheim's study sought to show that what is apparently 'the most inscrutable of private acts' is in fact programmed into societies by cultural, religious, social, and economic forces and not (just) a result of rational (or indeed irrational) decisions by more or less fallible, more or less mentally ill (temporarily or otherwise), more or less evil, more or less politically subversive individuals.[124] Or rather, the sociologization of suicide in what one commentator in 1861 calls the 'era of statistics' demanded that the act be understood as determined by social, cultural, religious, economic, legal, and political forces on individual subjects.[125] As Zohreh Bayatrizi remarks, the nineteenth century thus saw a 'discursive transformation of suicide from an individual *act* . . . to a social and medical *problem*', and John Weaver has described how, by a series of 'intellectual sleights of hand', Durkheim ('the magician of sociology') managed to transform an act undertaken by individuals into 'a social phenomenon'.[126] Indeed, Durkheim's four categories – egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic – are all conceived specifically in relation to a subject's integration or lack of integration into his or her social milieu. Durkheimian sociology directly contradicts the Romantic, heroic, religious, or medical accounts of suicide inasmuch as each implicitly and exclusively specifies a profound individuality as the impulse towards suicide (the Romantic dies for a certain self-constructed erotic, artistic, ideological, or philosophical ideal; the hero for a personal sense of absolute duty; the sinner dies as a direct result of his or her depravity; the madman as a function of his individualized insanity). As Anne Nesbet comments, the new 'scientific' or 'sociological' approach conceived of suicide 'not as something atypical and extraordinary, but as part of what was typical of a certain kind of society', according to which any individual suicide began to be understood to have meaning 'only as a part of a social pattern'.[127] There is, of course, a certain irony in this, because inasmuch as suicide can be considered a final rejection of others and therefore of society, it fundamentally resists the *socio*, the very basis of the new discipline that Durkheim is helping establish. By subjecting suicide to a sociological analysis, in turn, Durkheim may be said to be violently resisting its very *raison d'être*, so to speak. By declaring suicide to be 'part of the normal state',[128] late nineteenth-century sociology threatens to undermine or unground the act's very rationale in many cases. The move marks a crucial moment in the history of the discourse of suicide, but it also

articulates a more general question concerning the complex and equivocal status of suicide – both as an individual/pathological condition and as a social action; as a function of the personal, subjective, internal, and psychological and as a function of the external, the political, and the social; a problem for the priest, doctor or psychiatrist, and for the sociologist, anthropologist, or epidemiologist; as 'normal', everyday, general, and as singular or pathological. The theorist of suicide Jean Baechler neatly comments on this crux in his 1975 study, *Suicides*:

> Because, except for certain exceptional cases, suicide is universally considered as unnatural, aberrant, and, in the end, inhuman, the first tendency necessarily consists in interpreting it as the result of a 'power' exercised over the unfortunate individual that pushes him to his death. Scientific thought changes none of this. Simply, instead of placing this force in the gods or in fate, one seeks it in forces either *external* or *internal* to the subject. This is why one may find but two broad types of theories on suicide: (1) *Sociological* theories, which place this suicidal power outside the individual in the social conditions under which he lives; (2) *Psychological* (or psychoanalytic or psychiatric) theories that see it in the innermost reaches of the psyche.[129]

While Baechler universalizes this dialectic of the sociological and the psychological, what emerges in the later nineteenth century is a particular focus on and continual struggle between these two explanatory poles. And throughout the twentieth century, the relationship between the individualistic accounts and social explanations is in constant play. It is indeed within the terms of the unfathomable, endlessly tempting, deeply troubling, and finally intractable question of suicide, that what Charles Turner refers to as the 'virulent' negotiation between the individual and society is perhaps most visible and most productive.[130]

Twentieth-Century Suicides

Moving away from the religious and ethical condemnations and justifications that characterize suicide discourse in earlier centuries, twentieth-century literary representations of suicide have tended to focus on such questions as why it happens, how it feels to survive it, and, most pointedly, what it means to accomplish it. Against the dominant 'normatively monolithic' pathologization of suicide in medical discourse, post-theological, post-ethical, Freudian and post-Freudian, modernist and postmodern understandings of suicide tend to acknowledge the act as a necessary and unavoidable possibility in human communities.[131] There is an acceptance in such thinking of the fundamentally philosophical idea

that, under certain circumstances, suicide is not only a viable option but is also legitimate, legal, and ethical – and thus no longer taboo. If not a right exactly, suicide is at least an inevitable and inarguable human option. Embracing such assumptions, modern and contemporary literature engages with and seeks to express or reflect a fascination with suicide in secular, anethical and supralegal ways – ways that are primarily subjective, individualistic, and affective but that are intricately responsive to cultural standards and to social, political, religious, ethical, and economic norms – and to represent in diverse and narratologically innovative modes the very act of suicide as an event that is disseminated throughout a text and throughout a life.

In particular, such texts engage with what one critic calls the 'ineradicable opacity' of suicide, since, as Henry de Montherlant remarks in a 1970 essay, 'There is nothing more mysterious than a suicide'.[132] As a result, modern and particularly contemporary suicide narratives are concerned to explore, above all and however inconclusively, both what suicide means and what it is *like*. In addition to the question of the effect of suicide on the survivor in novels from James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) at the beginning of the twentieth century to Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007), Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), Joshua Ferris's *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* (2014), and Carmiel Banasky, *The Suicide of Clair Bishop* (2016) at the beginning of our own, a key concern has to do with what might be called the phenomenology of suicide, with understanding the experience of the suicide herself. Twentieth-century literature seeks to extend and develop what is presented paradigmatically in Goethe's influential account of Werther's death, or in Tolstoy's epic or Flaubert's satirical banalization of narcissistic self-slaughter in *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*, as relatively brief and sketchy attempts to imagine the suicide in her last moments, as necessarily exiguous attempts to conceive of the suicide's thoughts, feelings, impulses, desires, actions. Such works characteristically develop such tentative and fleeting apprehensions of suicidality in order to explore what it might be like not only to be suicidal but also ultimately to undertake the act of killing oneself. Writing in 1892, Maudsley argues that the motives for suicide are typically 'mixed' and 'their main work unconscious'. As such, he wryly suggests, literary representations miss the mark: in the 'philosophy of novels and psychological poets', the motives for suicide can be 'set forth with a precision and lucidity which would be admirable if only the expositions had the least application to real life', he remarks.[133] But in varied, inventive, and sometimes narratively distinctive ways, twentieth-century writing implicitly confronts this challenge by imagining the state

of mind of the suicide – his or her consciousness, sensations, memories, thoughts, desires, regrets, hopes, impulses. The suicide is no longer simply other – criminal, evil, or insane. As such, he or she becomes the object of a particularly urgent need for explanation. Literary narratives seek to *know* suicide, to experience suicidality from the inside. And they seem to do so precisely to attempt to give what is now recognized as the everyday but inexplicable act of suicide some sense or meaning. In this regard, the two perspectives – the experience of suicide and the experience of the suicide survivor – come together, are inextricably entangled, in a collective project that attempts to fathom the unfathomable, to make sense of a senseless act of ordinary despair, and to give shape to an event that threatens to undo all order, reason, and meaning.

CHAPTER 3

A World Without Meaning
Ford Madox Ford and Modernist Suicide

Suicide is particularly prevalent in the canon of high-modernist fiction of the 1910s to 1930s: not only does Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses* repeatedly recall the suicide of his father, but as we will see in Chapter 4, each of James Joyce's major works includes at least one notable instance of suicide or suicide ideation. Virginia Woolf originally intended the title character in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) to kill herself, but in the published novel Clarissa Dalloway's suicidality is displaced onto the war veteran Septimus Smith, who thinks it possible that 'the world itself is without meaning' and whose death overshadows her party, while *The Waves* (1931) also features the suicide of one of its six speaking characters.[1] In D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913), Paul contemplates but draws back from suicide in the wake of his mother's death, and *Women in Love* (1920) ends with the suicide of Gerald Crich, part of 'the broader global "death process" on which *Women in Love* is focused'.[2] The suicide of Quentin Compson is arguably the central event in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) eventuates in the suicide-by-hanging of John the Savage, and dramatic suicides impel the plots of Elizabeth Bowen's *To the North* (1932), which ends as Emmeline kills herself and her ex-lover in a car crash; *The House in Paris* (1935), in which, in a stunning moment, Max quietly slits his wrists in the presence of Mme Fischer before quietly walking away to die; and *The Heat of the Day* (1948), in which Robert Kelway leaps, or falls, to his death from Stella Rodney's roof.[3] As Ulrika Maude has recently argued, although it has largely been overlooked in his critical reception, suicide appears frequently in Samuel Beckett's work over a period of more than forty years, almost always in marginal, allusive, or drily satirical ways – for example in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932), 'Love and Lethe' (1934), 'The End' (1946), *Eleutheria* (1947), *Molloy* (1951), *Malone Dies* (1951), *Waiting for Godot* (1953), *Embers* (1959), *Happy Days* (1961), *Film* (1964), *Eh Joe* (1966), and *Rough for Theatre II* (1976).[4]

In this chapter, however, I want to examine in detail Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* (1915) as an early modernist novel that brings suicide into the narrative foreground both as a structuring device and as a thematically and rhetorically prominent concern. By the time he started work on *The Good Soldier* in 1914, Ford had a record of suicide threats and suicide ideation. Max Saunders, Ford's most recent biographer, argues that imagining his own death was something of a 'morbid fascination' and a 'powerful lifelong impulse of his art',[5] and Ford's life and his writing offer many moments in which suicide is contemplated and suicidality expressed. In 1893, for example, Ford wrote to his future wife, Elsie, of a 'fearful panic' that regularly 'seizes' him, 'a dread of the unknown' along with the thought that 'we must be buried in each other's arms' – for, he asserts, 'we must & shall die together' (*FMF* 57). The following year, with her father threatening to end their courtship, Ford implied to Elsie that suicide was permanently available, writing of 'a short shrift and a few feet of rope always getatable': he has waited ten years for Elsie, Ford declares ruefully, melodramatically, and exaggeratedly, if also with a hint of self-mockery, and it will 'go hard' if after so long waiting 'it would be necessary to puncture one's jugular' (*FMF* 75). In a 1913 deposition related to his attempt to divorce from Elsie, Ford recalls being 'on the point of committing suicide by means of prussic acid' when his future lover, Violet Hunt, entered his life (*FMF* 285); and Hunt claimed in her 1926 autobiography *The Flurried Years*, that in 1909, early in their relationship, Ford spoke of suicide while reading to her the draft of *A Call*, explaining that he had worked out a scheme to ensure his children would benefit from his life insurance by taking poison and then disguising his suicide by throwing himself under a bus.[6] Saunders notes that Ford was often 'suicidally depressed' between 1912 and the end of the First World War (*FMF* 375) and that after he completed *The Good Soldier* in 1914, Ford said goodbye to his friends 'as if, having imagined Ashburnham's suicide, he was trying to live it out as his own' (*FMF* 465). This seems to be borne out by the implications of the 'Dedicatory Letter' to the American edition of the novel (1927), in which Ford tells the dedicatee, Stella Bowen, that 'it is certain that without the incentive to live you offered me I should scarcely have survived the war-period'.[7] It perhaps comes as no surprise, in this context, that there are innumerable references to suicide in the eighty-odd books – novels, novellas, collections of short stories and essays, biographies, memoirs, history books, travel writing, literary criticism, and volumes of poems – that Ford published. The title poem in his first collection of poetry, *Questions at the Well* (1893), for example, describes a couple's suicide pact, and suicide is

also imagined in another poem from the collection, 'Hope in the Park', as well as in a short story 'What Happened at Eleven Forty-five' (1911) and in what his co-author, Joseph Conrad, calls 'a small piece of collaboration' and 'something in the nature of a fragment', the novella *The Nature of a Crime* (written in 1909).[8] The theme appears in other novels, too: in *Parade's End* (1924–8), Tietjens's father is a suicide, and suicides feature prominently in *The Shifting of the Fire* (1892), *The New Humpty Dumpty* (1912), *Mr Fleight* (1913), *The Marsden Case* (1923), *Henry for Hugh* (1934), and, perhaps most strikingly, *The Rash Act* (1933), a novel based around the planned suicide of its poverty-stricken protagonist Henry Martin and the actual suicide of his friend (and double), the wealthy Hugh Monckton – a theme that allows Ford full range to meditate on suicide and suicidality.[9]

It is in *The Good Soldier*, however, one of the great early modernist novels in English, that the question of suicide is presented most decisively and perhaps most troublingly. Ford Madox Ford's most accomplished novel is a tour de force of narrative indirection and unreliability, unstable ironization, epistemological uncertainty, syntactical deformation, narratological insecurity, formal and chronological dislocation, and intellectual and emotional duplicity.[10] It is a story that proceeds, as one contemporary reviewer put it, 'in broken and spasmodic gusts'.[11] But these unsettling and destabilizing narratological effects – a 'moral fecklessness' of narration that provides the novel with a 'paradoxical energy' according to Eugene Goodheart[12] – can themselves be understood as bound up with the question of modernist suicidality that, building on the work of Henry James and Joseph Conrad in particular, Ford's novel inaugurates.[13] *The Good Soldier*, in other words, is both riven and propelled by forms of narratorial ineptitude that also offer a nuanced and conceptually and formally innovative take on a tradition of suicide narrative that streams like a poison through the tainted life blood of the modernist literary canon. As in the work of later modernist writers, Ford's novel explores the formal and structural deformations consequent upon a narrative that presents suicide as its pivotal event. The almost opaque, almost inconceivable act of suicide is something like a negative force field – a narratological black hole – around which the narrator agnoiologically, and in both practical and conceptual terms, helplessly circles.

The narrator of *The Good Soldier*, John Dowell, disconcertingly insists that his tale is lacking crucial elements of storytelling in its classic, tragic form – or rather, he believes that the tale *includes* elements that resist (tragic) story-making: radical contingency, an unpredictable narrative logic, non-teleology and non-linearity, dissonant epistemologies,

hermeneutic obscurity, and characterological inconsistency. Above all, Dowell paradoxically acknowledges (and in acknowledging it both confirms and resists the point) that his tale lacks narrative control. As critics have noted, he repeatedly emphasizes his own ignorance and incompetence. For David Bradshaw, the 'mood' that 'dominates the novel' is that of doubt, while for Ann Snitow, Ford 'raises the condition of not knowing to an art', discovering endless ways to 'express the most subtle of the humiliations of the modern mind'.[14] Paul Armstrong comments that the condition of 'naïve bafflement is, in Ford's view, our original way of knowing the world', and Michael Levenson notes that Dowell 'occupies a strangely lit zone between tact and catatonia'.[15] Assertions of ignorance, an avowed 'epistemological humility', stud and even structure Dowell's narrative, which becomes, according to Sara Haslam, 'one long confessional' with regard to the narrator's 'physical, cognitive, experiential inadequacy'.[16] Such confessions include not only Dowell's many assurances of his own ignorance of the past of which he is telling but also more strikingly, perhaps, his own ignorance as the person doing the telling now: it is meta-narrative ignorance. The comments occur with, for the conscientious reader, alarming frequency: 'I don't know . . . I know nothing – nothing in the world – of the hearts of men' (*GS* 11); 'I don't know; I don't know . . . Who knows?' (*GS* 14); 'I don't know', 'It is all a darkness' (*GS* 16); 'Why does one do things?', 'I don't know why I had gone to New York; I don't know why I had gone to tea' (*GS* 20); 'I don't know' (*GS* 39); 'I don't know how we put in our time. How does one put in one's time?' (*GS* 44); 'I don't know' (*GS* 81); 'Just Heavens, I do not know'. 'But what were they? The just? The unjust? God knows!' (*GS* 82); 'Of the question of the sex-instinct I know very little' (*GS* 135); 'Who knows?' (*GS* 141); 'I do not know that there was ever any question of love from Edward to her' (164); 'I don't exactly know', 'I don't know' (*GS* 167); 'I don't understand the bearing of these things in English society' (*GS* 172); 'it is difficult to figure out' (*GS* 182); 'It is all a darkness' (*GS* 192); 'These things are a little inscrutable' (*GS* 215); 'I don't know how Florence had time to write to her aunt' (*GS* 229); 'I do not know whether to think that' (*GS* 234); 'the human heart is a very mysterious thing' (*GS* 235); 'I don't know what [the letter] contained' (*GS* 243); 'I leave it to you', 'God knows what was in Leonora's mind exactly' (*GS* 244); 'God knows what Leonora said' (*GS* 265); 'what should these people have done', 'What then, should they have done?' (*GS* 268); 'I don't know why I should always be selected to be serviceable' (*GS* 270); 'Why can't people have what they want?', 'Perhaps you can make head or tale of it; it is beyond me', 'Who the devil knows?' (*GS* 273); 'I don't know' (*GS* 280);

'I am only an ageing American with very little knowledge of life' (*GS* 281); 'I don't know. I know nothing. I am very tired', 'I don't know. I leave it to you' (*GS* 82); 'I can't make out which of them was right. I leave it to you' (*GS* 283).

The problem is not just that Dowell is epistemologically bereft or that the novel is (more correctly, according to Frank Kermode) about the 'ambiguities of knowing';[17] it is also that Dowell's inadequacy is precisely focused on his incompetence as a narrator. A major part of the interest in reading *The Good Soldier* has in fact to do with the novel's struggle with the terms of its own generic and narrative assumptions, its explicit and often incisive meditation on the centrality of ignorance to storytelling. Dowell's paradoxical confessions of narrative incompetence and cognitive and interpretative uncertainty haunt not only the content of the 'saddest story' but also its form and include most catastrophically his inadequacies as a narrator. Originating in Ancient Greek *gnarus*, 'knowing', the narrator *qua* narrator is (like Lacan's conception of the analyst) nothing other than the one-who-is-supposed-to-know.[18] And yet, by repeatedly commenting on his own epistemological doubt and therefore on his inability to tell his story, Dowell emphasizes the impossibility not only of knowing that something occurred or what it means but also, more fundamentally, of knowing what counts as an event or as an explanation for an event – without which there can be no narration in the first place. His work of narration revolves 'unceasingly', as Dowell puts it, 'round and round in a weary, baffled space of pain' (*GS* 268): 'I don't know how it is best to put this thing down – whether it would be better to try and tell the story from the beginning', he comments early on (*GS* 17); 'I don't know that a very minute study of their progress towards complete disunion is necessary', he says later on (*GS* 163). 'Is all this digression or isn't it digression?', Dowell asks towards the beginning of his story, before answering, 'I don't know' (*GS* 19). 'I have, I am aware, told this story in a very rambling way', he admits a little later (*GS* 213), and then 'Perhaps all these reflections are a nuisance; but they crowd on me. I will try to tell the story', he says (*GS* 238).[19] At one point, Dowell gives up conventional narration because 'It is so difficult to keep all these people going' and tries instead to 'put it down in diary form' (*GS* 256). If readers are unable to look to the narrator to distinguish, for example, between what is digressive and what is central to a narrative, then they might as well stop reading. What else is a story for but to tell us what a digression is, why one does things, and how to fill one's days?

There is, above all in *The Good Soldier*, the overriding problem of character, of the character and personality of other people – the problem of

knowing other people and of knowing oneself. As Armstrong notes, 'One of the main themes of *The Good Soldier* is the opacity of others'.[20] Understanding other people is, of course, fundamental to storytelling, but Dowell gets people wrong – gets them wrong again and again, as he himself confesses. 'After forty-five years of mixing with one's kind, one ought to have acquired the habit of being able to know something about one's fellow beings', Dowell remarks, but 'one doesn't' (*GS* 44). 'Who in this world knows anything of any other heart', he asks, 'or of his own?' (*GS* 182). 'It is very difficult to give an all-round impression of any man', he comments, wondering how far he has 'succeeded' in the case of Edward: 'I dare say I haven't succeeded at all', he concludes (*GS* 177). While one can have what Dowell calls 'an average estimate of the way a person will behave', such estimates are partial, limited, and unreliable: 'one cannot be certain of the way any man will behave in every case – and until one can do that a "character" is of no use to anyone' (*GS* 182). There is no certainty about an individual's actions, in other words, and therefore no certainty about the character of any other person – there is *no* knowledge of a character. There is only knowledge that has no use, knowledge that amounts to the status of nonknowledge.

What we might call Dowell's epistemologico-narrative ineptitude also pervades the affective force to which he repeatedly refers in his declarations that this is the 'saddest story I have ever heard' (*GS* 7; see also 61, 136). It is the 'Saddest Story', he tells us, 'just because there was no current to draw things along to a swift and inevitable end' (*GS* 192), suggesting that the sadness inheres in the un-story-like nature of the story, its lack of forward propulsion, the fact that it has no logic, no end, no inevitability. Effectively a function of the double suicide that the text narrates – what *could* be sadder than suicide, Ford's working title and the novel's first sentence implicitly ask[21] – the 'sadness' generates (or is generated by) effects that will become familiar in the fast-developing mode of modernist writing: formal hiatuses; lexical, syntactical, and figurative distortions or disturbances; narratological failures or faults or dysfunctions; hermeneutic and epistemological lapses; and obscurities. There is in the story, 'no nemesis, no destiny', Dowell goes on in a recognizably Conradian metaphor:

> [H]ere then, were two noble natures, drifting down life, like fireships afloat on a lagoon and causing miseries, heartaches, agony of the mind and death. And they themselves steadily deteriorated? And why? For what purpose? To point what lesson? It is all a darkness. (*GS* 192)

Often remarked on by critics, the phrase to which the series of narratological questions leads – 'It is all a darkness' – is also, of course, a self-conscious

echo of or allusion to Conrad's Marlow (especially, for example, to Marlow's startling opening words in *Heart of Darkness*) – to a narrator who repeatedly produces baffled declarations of the ethical, conceptual, metaphorical, and literal darkness that threatens to engulf *his* story.[22] And as in Conrad's celebrated novella, such comments throw the emphasis back onto the act of storytelling itself while at the same time threatening to undo the act. 'It is all a darkness', Dowell had commented at the end of the first section of the novel on what he calls the 'elementary' matter of the 'morals of sex' (*GS* 16) before beginning the next section by declaring unequivocally his radical narratological doubt: 'I don't know how it is best to put this thing down' (*GS* 17).

It is important to recognize that Ford is not just idly or arbitrarily playing with the logic of and conventional expectations for narrative form. It is not just that Ford is indulging in what Lawrence Thornton calls an 'impish delight in obfuscation'.[23] Rather, these narratological equivocations, hiatuses, aporias are specifically attuned to, even generated by, a narrative that is impelled by not one but two acts of suicide – the suicide of the narrator's wife, Florence, and the suicide of his friend, Edward Ashburnham – in which 'the sudden and brutal shock' of suicide constitutes the central, determining, event, but is, at the same time, systematically obscured.[24] And it is notable that while the two suicides may be said to constitute the generating force of the novel, like almost everything else in *The Good Soldier* neither one is properly or adequately or effectively narrated. Or to put it differently (since it is precisely these narratological disturbances and equivocations that constitute the novel's power), in both cases the telling is radically and triumphantly undercut or undermined in terms of sequence and explanation. This undermining is not simply a function of a social taboo or cultural unease regarding the production of suicide narratives: it is not just an effect of a cultural silencing or decorous social restraint, but has to do with a certain 'modernist' disposition. David Bradshaw has commented on the way that 'the old order is under attack from modernity on many fronts' in *The Good Soldier*,[25] and my insistence on Ford's modernity, in effect his *modernism*, is propelled by my sense that the formal experimentation and innovation of the writing are bound up with the acts of suicide – suicide as *the* act of modernity – through which it proceeds and that it, the writing, nevertheless systematically displaces.[26] It is only, in a sense, in modernism – in the writing of Ibsen, James, Hardy, Conrad, Joyce, Woolf, Lawrence, Bowen, Faulkner, Beckett, and of course Ford himself – that suicide, suicide ideation, and suicidality become visible *as* a viable or indeed rational act, and visible as an act and a thought in refracted, displaced, and cognitively and conceptually shattered ways. What modernist suicidality

amounts to is the sense that suicide becomes visible just to the extent that it cannot be effectively seen.

While neither of the suicides in *The Good Soldier* is conventionally or indeed properly narrated, therefore, both effectively haunt the novel as a whole, in disturbingly uncanny and predominantly indirect, disguised, disjunctive, and digressive ways. And it is precisely the *way* that suicide is presented that is crucial. Edward's suicide is foreshadowed and otherwise alluded to at various points in *The Good Soldier*, but is not directly narrated. As Samuel Hynes comments, the deaths of Florence and Edward are '"thrown away", anticipated in casual remarks so as to deprive them of melodramatic force, and treated . . . almost as afterthoughts'.[27] Edward's death is subtly foreshadowed as the novel opens, in fact, when Dowell lists the ages of the four main actors in the story he is about to tell, commenting that Edward 'would have been' forty-two (which means, since he is not forty-two, that he must no longer be alive) (*GS* 8). More explicitly, Dowell remarks later on that 'Leonora had got it into her head that Edward was trying to commit suicide' when, on a troop ship in the Red Sea, he 'heroically' jumped overboard for a second time to save a private soldier amid what she describes as a 'suicidal craze' on board – a comment that undecidably conflates the heroic saving of a suicide with the suicidal impulse itself (*GS* 199–200). The question of Edward's incipient suicidality – the sense that he might permanently be on the verge of taking his own life – recurs shortly after Leonora blurts out to him that she knows he is in love with Nancy and Nancy with him, and offers to divorce him if he wishes. Leonora is then suddenly gripped by the fear that her husband has killed himself on account of what she said (*GS* 244–5), and goes to his gun room to see, where she finds him oiling a gun. Even though it strikes her as 'an unusual thing to do, at that time of night, in his evening clothes' and even though she ventures into the gun room precisely *because* she fears that Edward might be suicidal, Dowell notes that 'it never occurred to her' that Edward might 'shoot himself with that implement' (*GS* 246). She is correct in the sense that he doesn't shoot himself (he slits his wrists instead), and right that he doesn't kill himself there and then (the suicide occurs some weeks later), but wrong in the implication that Edward would not violently end his own life, since that is exactly what he does. The final indication of Edward's habitual suicidality occurs when Leonora insists to Nancy that Edward is 'dying', actually dying, for his unrequited and apparently unrequitable love for her (*GS* 248; see 261, 262) – a sentiment that Edward himself later confirms to Dowell (*GS* 287).

In these ways, Edward's suicide is repeatedly foreshadowed, but not directly narrated. The initial explicit reference to his suicide – the novel's central, organizing event – comes as late as Chapter 2 in Part IV, more than two hundred pages into the novel, and then only in a confusing aside. After Nancy Rufford has left for India, Dowell notes that Leonora made a 'terrible scene' about the 'time and trouble' that Edward had spent on getting a gardener's daughter acquitted of the murder of her own (and by implication, perhaps, Edward's) baby. Dowell comments insouciantly that it is Leonora's threat to withdraw Edward's access to his bank account and the fact that he had therefore not only lost Nancy but also could no longer be of 'public service' that 'made him cut his throat' (*GS* 226). Rather than being narrated as an event in itself, the suicide is related in passing, as a comment on the consequences of Leonora's anger with and financial control over her husband. The reader is not aware, at this point, that Edward slit his throat and is only informed of it here in a grammatically and thematically subordinate way – indeed, the reader is offered an explanation *for* the act before she is made aware *that* it occurred. The suicide is again alluded to before it is directly reported some fifty pages later, when Dowell comments that he failed to prevent Edward from 'cutting his throat' and refers to the fact that Nancy had heard about the suicide by reading it in a newspaper after she has been sent away (*GS* 270). Once again, the act is alluded to indirectly in an aside in which the reader's knowledge of it is presupposed – an effect that is repeated a few pages later, when Dowell refers to Nancy 'getting, at Aden, the news of his suicide' and descending into madness (*GS* 282). It is towards this death that everything in the novel has been 'inexorably progressing', as Max Saunders puts it (*FMF* 438), and yet the event is shrouded in a series of subtle narrative displacements. Whether or not Dowell's 'offhand manner' is, as Saunders argues (echoing Dowell's own reasoning), a 'defence against breaking down with grief' (*FMF* 438), there is certainly a deft narrative sleight of hand at work here that has the effect of concealing as much as revealing the motivations and impulses of a narrator whose actions, attitudes, and disposition are at once marginal and central to his own story.

The actual account of Edward's death, such as it is, in fact comes *after* Dowell announces that he has reached the end of his story: 'Well, that is the end of the story', he says, five pages before he finishes telling it. The story has a 'happy ending' with 'wedding bells and all', he says contentiously, and it is one in which the 'villains' ('Edward and the girl') are 'punished by suicide and madness' (*GS* 289) in a world where 'the passionate, the headstrong, and the too-truthful are condemned to suicide and to

madness' (*GS* 291). But then two pages before the actual last word of the novel, Dowell remembers that he has forgotten to tell us about the unhappy end of Edward himself. The act of suicide around which the narrative circles, its dark centre, is also an afterthought, a narratological supplement. To complete his already completed story, Dowell recounts the moment just before the suicide occurs: he recalls talking to Edward in the stables and being interrupted by a messenger with a telegram from Nancy in which she announces that she has arrived in Brindisi and is having 'a rattling good time' (*GS* 293). Edward takes out a penknife from his pocket. The penknife goes unremarked, but Edward asks Dowell to take the telegram to show Leonora, fixing him with 'a direct, challenging, brow-beating glare': 'I guess he could see in my eyes that I didn't intend to hinder him' (*GS* 294), Dowell comments, fixing the reader, in turn, with a direct, challenging, and, in a sense, brow-beating narratorial glare – a challenge to judge him, to criticize or condemn him for his failure to 'hinder' the suicide that he surely knows at some level is about to occur. Although Dowell does not comment on the penknife, he registers it (noting that it is 'quite small'),[28] and his after-the-fact justification for not intervening in the suicide of the good soldier is characteristically confused and obfuscatory:

> I didn't think he was wanted in the world, let his confounded tenants, his rifle-associations, his drunkards, reclaimed and unreclaimed, get on as they liked. Not all the hundreds and hundreds of them deserved that that poor devil should go on suffering for their sakes. (*GS* 294)

Dowell's extraordinary and syntactically contorted self-justificatory explanation for not intervening and preventing Edward from killing himself lurches, mid-sentence, from the idea that he is not wanted in the world (as if that in itself justifies his death) to the idea that, whether he is wanted or not, his being wanted is not an argument for preventing him from killing himself since, as the next sentence explains, those who need Edward, those that he helps, don't 'deserve' that he should 'go on suffering for their sakes'. And the exchange ends, as Dowell's story does, with yet another indication of the narrator's epistemological and social ineffectuality, as man and as narrator. Edward says goodbye, explaining that he needs 'a bit of a rest'. 'I didn't know what to say' (*GS* 294), Dowell says, expressing doubt about what would be 'English good form' under the circumstances, but also signalling an extreme ethical disconnect between manners on the one hand and suicidality on the other.[29]

But we should not forget that *The Good Soldier* is in fact split and divided suicidologically by the fact that it recounts not one but two deaths. It is

not just Dowell's friend, Edward, who commits suicide but also Dowell's wife (and Edward's long-term lover), Florence, whose death is confronted and addressed one hundred pages into the novel. The suicide occurs on 4 August 1913, an august date for Florence – her birthday; the day she sets out for a European tour with her uncle; the day she takes a lover; her wedding day; the anniversary of the death of Maisie Maidan, Edward's previous lover; the day of her death (see *GS* 91).[30] While her act is known to a number of others, the fact that Florence commits suicide is only revealed to Dowell, her husband, and then only in passing, some months after it has occurred. Dowell only hints that Florence's death is a suicide when he first recounts it: after she rushes upstairs to her hotel room, Dowell finds her 'lying, quite respectably arranged, unlike Mrs. Maidan, on her bed' with a 'little phial that rightly should have contained nitrate of amyl, in her right hand' (*GS* 119). The contrast with Mrs Maidan is significant because the latter was specifically described as *not* a suicide, even though her death is sudden, unexpected, and, like Florence's, in a hotel room: Maisie dies 'in the effort to strap up a great portmanteau . . . so grotesquely that her little body had fallen forward into the trunk, and it had closed upon her, like the jaws of a gigantic alligator,' but 'you understand she had not committed suicide' (*GS* 88). Florence's corpse is, by contrast, anything but grotesque and is instead *arranged* 'quite respectably', unlike Maisie's explicitly non-suicidal corpse. The comment that the phial *should* have contained amyl nitrate (a treatment for angina pectoris, as Dowell notes, as well as an antidote to cyanide poisoning) also hints at suicide, and Dowell later confirms that instead of 'nitrate' the phial had, for many years, contained cyanide or 'prussic acid' (*GS* 126–7).[31] But at the time of her death and for some months afterwards, Dowell himself has no idea that his wife is a suicide, proceeding as he does under the misapprehension that, like Maisie, Florence died from a weak heart. When he learns the truth from Leonora back in England some months later, the information is presented to Dowell in a casual aside, a subordinate comment (not an aside *by* the narrator this time, but *to* the narrator while also of course to the reader). Shortly after informing Dowell (in another aside – 'isn't it odd to think that if your wife hadn't been my husband's mistress, you would probably never have been here at all?') that his dead wife had been her dead husband's mistress ('That was how I got the news – full in the face', Dowell explains, as if he has been slapped or punched (*GS* 124)), Leonora mentions Florence's suicide casually, apparently proceeding under the misapprehension that Dowell already knows of it. The extended scene of revelation is comic and at the same time excruciating in its refusal to come to the point – there is a curious

sense of 'leisure' imparted by the news, a sense that the two individuals are waiting for 'nothing'; 'extreme stillness' characterizes the scene, and the conversation proceeds with decency, vagueness, and exactitude. It is a quite remarkable piece of writing, one of the most powerful and effective in the novel:

> And then she turned round to me and said without any adornment at all, for I remember her exact words:
>
> 'I think it was stupid of Florence to commit suicide.'
>
> I cannot tell you the extraordinary sense of leisure that we two seemed to have at that moment. It wasn't as if we were waiting for a train, it wasn't as if we were waiting for a meal – it was just that there was nothing to wait for. Nothing.
>
> There was an extreme stillness with the remote and intermittent sound of the wind. There was the grey light in that brown, small room. And there appeared to be nothing else in the world.
>
> I knew then that Leonora was about to let me into her full confidence. It was as if – or no, it was the actual fact that – Leonora with an odd English sense of decency had determined to wait until Edward had been in his grave for a full week before she spoke. And with some vague motive of giving her an idea of the extent to which she must permit herself to make confidences, I said slowly – and these words too I remember with exactitude –
>
> 'Did Florence commit suicide? I didn't know.'
>
> I was just, you understand, trying to let her know that, if she were going to speak she would have to talk about a much wider range of things than she had before thought necessary.
>
> So that that was the first knowledge I had that Florence had committed suicide. It had never entered my head. You may think that I had been singularly lacking in suspiciousness; you may consider me even to have been an imbecile. But consider exactly the position. (*GS* 125–6)

There follows an extended explanation of why, in the midst of the commotion immediately following Florence's death her husband was not informed, and did not notice, that she had killed herself. But the description of the revelation is itself telling – in its insistence on the 'exact' words, in its sense of the poised, suspended atmosphere of the conversation, and in the way that the annihilation of Dowell's wife seems to lead to a sense of annihilation of the world – which is reduced to the 'nothing' that is contained in the 'brown, small room'. Once again, it is the inconsequentiality and grammatical and thematic subordination of the key information that is most striking here: Dowell does not register the suicide – this shocking,

world-shattering news – so much as note how careful he is, in responding to this information, to make clear to Leonora that his knowledge of events surrounding the death is profoundly limited. It is his epistemological insouciance, above all, that he seeks to explain and preserve.

This is a novel, then, that purports to tell us the saddest story and that nevertheless repeatedly fails to tell the ultimate sadness of suicide, or that at least displaces and distorts the story.[32] But it also fails to tell, to register, a final, hidden suicide narrative, or at least the novel displaces and disguises it. Levenson remarks that in Dowell, Ford invents a character who is 'virtually without attributes', a self or subject 'before it has assumed the articulations of character': Dowell is a 'nothing that precedes something in human personality, a formless, contentless, traitless self' that, as he puts it, 'does nothing, feels nothing, knows nothing'.[33] But another way to conceive of Dowell is in terms of a kind of purified suicidality. The point is in fact confirmed, indirectly, in Dowell's 'passionate' declaration at the end of the novel that he 'loves' Edward 'because', he says bizarrely, 'he was just myself.' 'If I had had the courage and virility and possibly also the physique of Edward Ashburnham I should, I fancy, have done much what he did', he remarks (*GS* 291). While Dowell's closing declaration of love and identification is often read as something like a homosocial version of Catherine's declaration of pure identificatory love for Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, it can also be read as a declaration of suicidality, since one of the things that Edward signally does, in the end, is to kill himself. To want to be Edward Ashburnham is to want to kill yourself. Dowell's attempt to explain his story when he does try to do so (rather than declaring, as he also does, that his 'queer' story 'means nothing' and is 'a picture without a meaning' (*GS* 292)) is, in the end, a sociological explanation: society *needs* the likes of Edward, Dowell declares, and (to a lesser extent) of Florence:

> Society must go on, I suppose, and society can only exist if the normal, if the virtuous, and the slightly-deceitful flourish, and if the passionate, the headstrong, and the too-truthful are condemned to suicide and to madness. But I guess that I myself, in my fainter way, come into the category of the passionate, of the headstrong, and the too-truthful. (*GS* 291)

The statement is, of course, a fine final instance of Dowell's self-delusion and self-contradiction: if he can say that he 'is' Edward 'then it would seem that he can say anything' (as Levenson comments),[34] and certainly the statement that he *is* his friend but that he does not have his friend's courage is archetypal Dowellian self-contradiction. But it is also, importantly, a tacit

recognition of Dowell's own incipient suicidality, a confession that one of the things that he would follow his friend in doing, had he the courage and the 'physique', is to slit his own throat.

This leads to my final point, which links to a central concern in the field of literary suicidology that I outline in this book – the fundamental and really quite troubling question of what the story is *for*. What is the purpose of Dowell's story and Ford's novel? What is the point of this saddest of all stories? Why tell it?

It is a question, or series of questions, that Dowell addresses early on, devoting his sixth paragraph to answering it:

> You may well ask why I write. And yet my reasons are quite many. For it is not unusual in human beings who have witnessed the sack of a city or the falling to pieces of a people to desire to set down what they have witnessed for the benefit of unknown heirs or of generations infinitely remote; or, if you please, just to get the sight out of their heads. (*GS* 9)

The equivocation over whether he is telling the story for the benefit of future generations or for himself involves familiar Dowellian uncertainty and obfuscation: the two explanations are very far apart and may even be thought to be mutually exclusive. The phrase, 'If you please', characteristically deflects responsibility for this critical question from the speaker, but there is anyway a double incommensurability of the individual and the general that the comment disguises – the incommensurability of the disaster in the lives of these four or five people as against the disaster affecting a city or a civilization; the incommensurability of the benefit for the individual storyteller as against the benefit for untold future generations. By offering these fundamentally incompatible options for the story's rationale, Dowell/Ford point to the structural illegitimacy of the narrative. To be told, the narrative must have some purpose. But the radical incommensurability of these narrative justifications undermines the coherence of purpose in the same way that the narrator's insistent rhetoric of agnoiology undermines the coherence and viability of his storytelling.

And we will encounter this question again and again in this study: confronted with the quotidian but incomprehensible trauma of suicide, twentieth-century writing comes up against, and indeed limns, the limits of literary efficacy. If literature is the space in which 'everything' can be said in 'every way', as Derrida argues,[35] modernist suicide confronts the possibility that it is also, and therefore, the space in which nothing can finally be justified or explained. How do future generations benefit from the knowledge that a city has been sacked or a people eradicated? How does telling a story

get the sight of it out of your head? What do you gain from reading about this double suicide? What does Dowell gain in telling it? Where is the benefit? What *good* is done? Just at the moment when the 'talking cure' is itself taking on its major explanatory and redemptive role in Western culture, Ford questions the efficacy of such a cure by insisting on these questions. And just at the point at which sociology is being established as a major discourse and discipline – by and through, not least, Émile Durkheim's disciplinarily inaugural book on suicide – Ford, the great modernist-sociologist writer, offers a sociological rationale that also undoes itself. Suicide and suicidality are not effaced or eradicated or explained or justified in the telling of *The Good Soldier*, but rather examined and explored in the only way they can be – by indirection, refraction, displacement, and through agnoiological representation. This is not to say that the suicides are not explained. Indeed, in a sense the explanations are too many: the suicidal events are, if anything, overdetermined. Florence kills herself because she has been overthrown in Edward's affections, because she has been discovered by her husband as unfaithful (the 'determining influence in her suicide', Dowell opines; *GS* 140); because she does not in fact have a 'heart' in any but the most literal senses; because she suffers from what Durkheim will call 'anomie'; because she is louche, loose, and Protestant. Edward kills himself because he has lost Nancy; because his financial independence has once again been removed; because his sense of himself as a good soldier collides with the lived reality; because the carefully guarded balance between his self-assumed role as protector of the weak and vulnerable, on the one hand, and lover on the other catastrophically breaks down in his relationship with Nancy; and because he is weak, sexually incontinent and, like Florence, Protestant.[36] In particular, the Durkheimian perspective, which is strongly hinted at in the so-called Protest scene when characters are divided into socially and culturally adhesive or integrated Catholics (Leonora) and culturally dispersed or un-integrated Protestants (Edward and Florence), indicates that the suicides of Florence and Edward are programmed by their cultural-religious affiliation to Protestantism.[37] If literary suicide narratives have a purpose, *The Good Soldier* suggests, it is nowhere else than in this acknowledgement of the dissonant, irredeemable inexplicability of suicide – an act that cannot be incorporated into or enmeshed within conventional narrative forms and that will always finally remain resistant to psychological and sociological explanations, not least because of the fundamental incompatibility of psychological with sociological reasoning.[38]

The problem of the novel's double suicide is, in the end, an ethical problem, and Dowell presents it as such when he contrasts Edward and

Nancy, the 'villains' who have been 'punished by suicide and madness', with Leonora, the 'perfectly normal, virtuous and slightly-deceitful heroine' who is rewarded by becoming 'the happy wife of a perfectly normal, virtuous and slightly-deceitful husband' (*GS* 289).[39] But it is a judgement that even Dowell does not trust (but then he trusts no judgements, especially not his own – except of course in this one thing: like a proper philosophical sceptic, the only thing that Dowell does not doubt is his own doubt). In the next paragraph, he admits that he 'dislikes' Leonora, either because he is jealous of her new husband or because 'the only two persons that I have ever really loved' were 'sacrificed for her respectable happiness' (*GS* 290). Similarly, it is clear that Dowell simply does not fully *believe* his own complacent assertion that 'society can only exist if the normal, if the virtuous, and the slightly-deceitful flourish, and if the passionate, the headstrong, and the too-truthful are condemned to suicide and to madness', not least because he concedes that he too can be categorized as 'passionate', 'headstrong', and 'too truthful' (*GS* 291). Ethics, too, breaks down as an explanatory system when it comes to suicide, the act in which accuser and accused, victim and perpetrator meet – or in which it can be said that there are only victims.[40]

Suicide, in other words, like the narratives that record and explain the act, solves, resolves nothing. Dowell's story and Ford's novel do not culminate in Edward's suicide, even if they both end with it. The ending is a false ending, tacked on to record an event that has already occurred – before Nancy's descent into permanent madness, before Dowell travels to India to collect her, before he buys Branshaw, before Leonora marries Rodney Bingham – six months before Dowell begins writing and eighteen months before he completes his story. And yet there may be a sense in which the suicides in Ford's novel *do* finally redeem or at least reconfigure things. As Armstrong comments, it is when Dowell's 'mistaken assumptions' about Florence's death are corrected that he is forced to 'reconsider other hidden sides': Dowell 'cannot understand her suicide without reinterpreting her relations with Leonora and Ashburnham, their relations with each other, and Nancy's relations with them'.[41] The same might be said of Edward's death, even if the consequences of those reinterpretations are dispersed, scattered through the narrative. In this respect, suicide may truly be said to be a lynchpin, a crux or hinge, in the novel – not just in the way that it forces Dowell to reconsider his complacent interpretations of people and events, but in the way that he is thereby also forced to reinterpret interpretation itself, its value and cogency, its potential and power. As Samuel Hynes comments, Socratically, 'To know what you can't know is nevertheless a kind of knowledge'.[42] It is in the question of knowing one's own

ignorance that the hermeneutic and ethical challenge of the suicides with which Dowell is confronted inheres, a challenge that dislodges his sense of his own powers of understanding and of narrative. Anne Nesbet comments that suicide constitutes a 'sudden rent' in a society's 'cultural fabric' to which that society's 'meaning makers rush in to fill that void with theories and explanations'.[43] But literature suggests something different: that narratives of suicide not only force us to reconsider our interpretation of people and events – prompt us to 'rush in with explanations' – but also force us to reconsider interpretation itself. Suicide, in the end, *means* only itself, just as Dowell's narrative means only in its becoming narrative, in its difficult, uneven, a-chronological and self-contradictory unfolding (there is no beyond, no prior event or series of events, only the complex process of narrating itself to which Dowell repeatedly, self-reflexively returns).[44] If, as Martin Stannard argues, the 'largest subject' of Ford's novel about the end of Edward is 'the transference from a culture of intellectual confidence to one of uncertainty' at the end of the *Edwardian* era,[45] then suicide may be seen as the ideal topic – necessarily, structurally mired as it is in epistemological uncertainty. Violent, quotidian, paradoxical, disciplinarily fragmented and interpretatively opaque, suicide, Ford's novel suggests, is the archetypal modernist act.

CHAPTER 4

'The love that kills'
Love, Art, and Everyday Suicide in James Joyce

> 'Logically, I see no end to *Ulysses* except the suicide of Bloom.'
>
> (Richard Aldington)

> 'A writer should never write about the extraordinary. That is for the journalist'.
>
> (James Joyce)[1]

Episodes of suicide feature prominently in almost all of James Joyce's works, major and minor. Such episodes operate in at least three interlinked modes: as a function of romantic love; as a crucial element in artistic production and as a sign of modernist authorship; and, more generally, as a fundamental, inescapable, and universal human possibility or temptation. And yet suicide has largely been overlooked in Joyce's reception: few critics have dwelled on the suicide of Bloom's father in *Ulysses*, for example, and Frederick Karl even remarked that suicide 'touches nearly every major phase and most writers *except* Joyce' in the modernist period.[2] But in a novel that is centrally concerned with relationships between fathers and sons, the suicide of Rudolf (Virag) Bloom is marked. And in this respect, *Ulysses* is far from unique in Joyce's *oeuvre*: two poems from *Pomes Penyeach* (1927) focus on suicide ('Tilly' and 'She Weeps over Rahoon'); suicide figures prominently in two stories in *Dubliners* (1914) ('A Painful Case' and 'The Dead'); in *Exiles* (1918) Robert talks about 'end[ing] it all' by throwing himself from a cliff (an impulse that is also entertained by both Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom);[3] *Giacomo Joyce* (written in 1914) features a visit to the grave of the 'suicide wife' of Pimply Meisel in the Jewish cemetery in Trieste;[4] the possibility of suicide plays an important part in Stephen's thinking and is central to his aesthetic theories in *Stephen Hero* (written 1901–6) and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916); as well as featuring a paternal suicide, *Ulysses* (1922) is haunted by *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's suicide play, and makes repeated references to suicide in the thoughts of both Bloom and

Stephen; and suicide even determines *Finnegans Wake* (1939) in a number of ways, including in the prominence of the suicide legend of Tristan and Iseult, in the evident influence of Sheridan Le Fanu's Chapelizod suicide narrative, *The House by the Churchyard* (1863), and in Tom Finnegan's undecidably suicidal fall from a ladder.[5]

In addition to attempting to resolve a significant lacuna around suicide and suicidality in the vast industry of Joyce criticism, in this chapter I focus on the tension between suicide as an event of aesthetic or tragic proportions in Joyce's work, on the one hand, and as quotidian, banal, or 'episodic', on the other. While usefully focusing our attention on the quotidian or episodic in Joyce, a recent essay by Sara Danius on the 'Dissolution of the Event' is exemplary of ways in which suicide is regularly elided in Joyce criticism. Danius repeatedly cites suicide as the kind of extraordinary event with which literature has traditionally been concerned in order to highlight the notable turn to the ordinary and the everyday that we encounter in modernist writing – her suggestion being that, in its constitutive ordinariness, Joyce's work is precisely *not* concerned with the melodramatic eventfulness of an act such as suicide.[6] But in *Ulysses* in particular, suicide is itself an 'everyday' occurrence, not least inasmuch as it is thought about, imagined, or remembered many times in just the one day that the novel records. It is in fact the *episodic* nature of suicide in Joyce's work – its repeated occurrence; its digressive or marginal nature (its *epi-eisodos*); and its fundamentally disjunctive, anti-narrative or un-narratable quality – that allows for its elision in the critical reception. Suicide is prominently at work in Joyce, but partly on account of its episodicity (it is repeatedly referred to, but in what seem to be narratively tangential or marginal ways that resist assimilation into conventional modes of narrativity), it remains marginalized within the context of what Galen Strawson has argued are predominantly narrative ('diachronic' rather than 'episodic') representations of subjectivity or selfhood.[7] While tragic, aesthetic, or epic suicide is the subject of sly, self-ironizing satire in many of Joyce's works, everyday or quotidian suicide is also increasingly represented as a constant, ever-present, but fundamentally inassimilable (non-)event in his work – its presence pervasive and yet resistant to a hegemonic narrativity that typically involves spiritual redemption, conceptual epiphany, and hermeneutic closure. There is a tension between tragic and quotidian suicide in Joyce, but it is the figuration of suicide as quotidian or episodic – that which is irredeemably of and beyond narration – that is finally more prominent, pervasive, and insistent in his work.

'Tilly': 'I bleed . . . / . . . For my torn bough!'

Two poems from *Pomes Penyeach*, 'Tilly' and 'She Weeps over Rahoon', directly address the question of suicide and throw light on its significance as a theme in Joyce's work more generally. While 'She Weeps over Rahoon' connects directly with and seems explicitly to reprise 'The Dead' as a text about the effect on the survivor of a love-suicide, 'Tilly' is more enigmatically coded in its engagement with the topic. In particular, 'Tilly' raises suicide as a question of aesthetics, framing it in terms of the opposition between literature on the one hand and money or commerce or the worldly on the other.

The question of the relationship between art and commerce – a theme that determines much of Joyce's writing and thinking – is addressed even in the title, 'Tilly'. The Anglo-Irish word 'Tilly' indicates an additional item, the thirteenth of a baker's dozen (from the Irish *tuilleadh*, 'an additional quantity, a supplement'; *OED*, 'Tilly', n.2). Joyce's twelve-line poem, originally drafted in Dublin in 1903, stands out from the twelve other poems in *Pomes Penyeach*, all of which were written in Europe between 1912 and 1924, emphasizing even in its title that it is a supplement, an undeserved or free extra, in a book of poems that (as the book's title insists) were priced at one penny each.[8] If the poems in the book cost a penny each, then 'Tilly' is removed from the economic arrangement of that book's publication, presented as outside the financial bargain struck by the book's title. Inasmuch as the book consists of a series of twelve poems costing 1d each, 'Tilly', the extra, the thirteenth poem ('Death's number', according to Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*), is in an important sense no part of that book.[9] Numbered 'I', 'Tilly' both is and is not part of *Pomes Penyeach*. Placing the poem at the beginning of the book (and indeed, by numbering it one in the sequence of thirteen poems), Joyce effectively points up its anomalous economic status. The poem's place in the sequence (not the thirteenth but the anomalous first) and its title announce it as only ambiguously part of the sequence or as part of it only *as* a supplement. The effect, then, is to privilege the poem as an anomaly, to focus attention on it as an inaugurating but unincluded poem and as one that has a specific economic (non-)status within the collection, which in turn draws attention to the nature of the economic contract by which poetry is bought, sold, and read.

Originally titled 'Cabra', the poem is about a peasant driving his cattle 'above Cabra' (the suburb of Dublin inhabited by the Joyce family between 1902 and 1905, as well as by Stephen Dedalus in *Stephen Hero* and *A Portrait*

of the Artist as a Young Man). The second stanza tells us that the peasant drives the cattle 'with a flowering branch before him', but in a remarkable and unnerving turn, which repeats the larger move at the end of *Portrait*, the poem then switches from third- to first-person narration: the final stanza indicates that the branch is in fact torn from the speaker, indeed from the poet himself:

> Boor, bond of the herd,
> Tonight stretch full by the fire!
> I bleed by the black stream
> For my torn bough![10]

Richard Ellmann characterizes 'Tilly' as 'summing up' Joyce's feelings on the death of his mother,[11] and this sense of something torn like a limb from a body can certainly be read as a physical manifestation of mourning. But any biographical reading of 'Tilly' as an elegy for Joyce's mother is complicated by the fact that the original version (which was indeed written soon after her death in 1903) had a very different ending:

> O herdsman, careful of the herd,
> Tonight sleep well by the fire
> When the herd too is asleep
> And the door made fast.[12]

While the first version of the poem may be read as allusively elegiac, the published version – the one revised more than twenty years after Mary Joyce's death – may be read fully and explicitly as elegiac. But as an elegy, the later version is also suicidal.[13] The evidence for the poem's engagement with suicide emerges most strongly via traces of intertextuality. Since the 1960s, critics such as Robert Scholes have argued that the final stanza of Joyce's *thirteenth* poem, his poem about *being* thirteenth, consciously evokes the *thirteenth* canto of Dante's *Inferno*, in which Virgil shows Dante the forest of suicides, featuring the souls of suicides embodied in and as broken, bleeding trees.[14] In this canto, Virgil introduces Dante to Pier della Vigne, a poet who has been betrayed and exiled by his patron and has resorted ultimately to suicide. Having crossed a dark river of blood, in Canto 13 Virgil warns Dante against breaking off a branch of a tree from which he can hear voices: 'Therefore my master said: "If you break off some little twig from one of these plants, the thoughts you have will all be cut off."' Dante's response is to do just that:

> Then I stretched out my hand a little before me and plucked a small branch from a great thornbush; and its stem cried out: 'Why do you split me?'
>
> When it had become dark with blood, it began again: 'Why do you pluck me? Have you no spirit of pity at all?'[15]

If the revised version of Joyce's poem involves a rewriting of Canto 13, then it can plausibly be read as a meditation on suicide. While the tearing off of a limb can be read in terms of a son's mourning for his mother, in the context of Dante it can also and, perhaps more properly, be read as relating to a suicide who has been transformed into a torn, bleeding tree.

The suicide subject in 'Tilly' is also, however, a figure for the exile.[16] Piero della Vigne in Canto 13 is an exiled poet with whom Dante seems strongly to identify, and the 'I' of the final stanza of Joyce's poem is a version of this figure from the suicide wood, the 'I' as an exile-suicide. As I will suggest, there are strong indications elsewhere (especially in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), that Joyce associated the poet figure with both the exile and the suicide.[17] If this 'thirteenth' poem is read in the context of the thirteenth canto of Dante's *Inferno*, then, it may be understood to repeat or reprise Joyce's lifelong concern with the artist or writer as, intrinsically, an exile – and (therefore) as such a suicide.[18] By placing 'Tilly', an unfunded non-financial supplement, at the beginning of *Pomes Penyeach*, Joyce sums up a concern with the relationship between art and suicide that informs his work from *Stephen Hero* on, emphasizing the idea of suicide and framing the collection in terms of the opposition between home, commerce, and Ireland on the one hand, and exile, art and suicide on the other.

Stephen Dedalus I: 'toys of desperation'

Critics have long recognized that one of the major themes of *Stephen Hero*, Joyce's abandoned autobiographical novel, is the opposition between art and commerce. But I argue here that in the novel (as well as later in *Ulysses*) the opposition is articulated in relation to the way that Stephen Dedalus engages with the 'temptation' of suicide. The opposition of art to commerce is explicitly presented in chapter 21 of *Stephen Hero* when Stephen begins to 'regard himself seriously as a literary artist' and to 'profess' 'scorn for the rabblement'.[19] He is contrasted with his friend Cranly, whose 'chosen companions represented the rabblement', who has 'all the rustic's affection for the prosaic things of the six days of the week', and who is discovered by Stephen reading a book called *Diseases of the Ox* (*SH* 123, 124). But in a subsequent conversation with Cranly in chapter 26, Stephen explores this

question more fully as he meditates on suicide precisely in the context of the relationship between art and commerce, and between spirit and world. As he walks with Cranly in Dublin, Stephen points to a 'newsbill' lying on the road announcing items in that day's edition of the *Evening Telegraph*. Among other things, these include 'Death of a Well-known Solicitor', 'Mad Cow at Cabra', and 'Literature &.' (*SH* 221). Picking up an idea from an earlier conversation and responding to Stephen's enquiry as to whether Cranly thinks that it 'requires great ability' successfully to be a 'pork-butcher' (his chosen profession), Cranly asks Stephen whether he considers literature 'the most important thing' out of the *Telegraph*'s list of headlines. Stephen's somewhat cryptic response articulates his sense of the profession of authorship by alluding to the temptation scene in the New Testament: both Christ and the author are tempted by 'the kingdom of this world,' and both resist that temptation. Both are also tempted by suicide:

> A few days ago I walked out to Howth for a swim and while I was going round the side of the Head I had to take a little ribbon of a path that hung high over the rocks . . .
> – What side of Howth?
> – Near the Bailey . . . Very good. As I looked down on those rocks beneath me the thought arose in my mind to cast myself down upon them. The thought made me shiver with pleasure for a moment, but, of course, I recognised our old friend. All these temptations are of a piece. To Jesus, to me, to the excitable person who adopts brigandage or suicide after taking the suggestions of literature too seriously, Satan offers a monstrous life. It is monstrous because the seat of the spiritual principle of a man is not transferable to a material object. A man only pretends to think his hat more important than his head. That view of life, I consider, is abnormal.
> – You cannot call that abnormal which everyone does.
> – Does everyone jump off the Hill of Howth? Does everyone join secret societies? Does everyone sacrifice happiness and pleasure to peace and to honour in the world? Father Artifoni told me of a society of mutual assistance in Italy the members of which had the right to be thrown into the Arno by their fellow-members on signing a paper proving that their case was past curing. (*SH* 222–3)

The reference to jumping off the cliffs near the Bailey lighthouse at Howth (a notorious suicide spot, at the opposite end of Dublin Bay from the Martello tower at Sandycove) is just one such reference in Joyce's work.[20]

Jumping, or falling at least, 'by design or accidentally' (*U* 583), is a recurrent trope in Joyce's work, spanning Robert's urge to throw himself from a cliff in *Exiles*; to the ending of 'The Dead', with its repetitive, rhythmical, somnambulant evocation of the fall of the snow (a fall that is synecdochically related to Gabriel and to thoughts of self-slaughter); to the micro- and macro-structural trope of rising/flying followed by an Icarean fall that distinguishes *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* stylistically, narratorially, and thematically; to the many references to falling in *Ulysses*; to, even the sheer fact that the death that is commemorated in the title to *Finnegans Wake* – a death that is both specific to the hod carrier Tim Finnegan and, at the same time, general, universal, everybody's and nobody's death – is caused by a fall from a ladder. And falling is, of course, freighted with Christian and other symbolism. But like drowning, the act is also fundamentally open to interpretation and is often undecidable or unreadable, since there are few circumstances in which a fall is unequivocally and unambiguously non-intentional.[21]

At this point in *Stephen Hero*, Stephen notes that the possibility of falling or jumping is encountered by Christ himself, since this is one of the temptations – the ultimate temptation – offered him by Satan in the wilderness. According to the notably untrustworthy Satan, jumping would not be suicidal since God has promised to save his son from coming to harm. But Satan's challenge and temptation to Christ to jump off the 'pinnacle of the Temple' nevertheless involve an archetypal gesture of suicide since inasmuch as Christ is mortal, such a leap – such a testing of God – would constitute an enactment of suicide: the testing of God's love would only be a test if there was the possibility of the son dying. It is significant that Stephen echoes the wording of the New Testament, in which Satan tempts Christ to 'cast thyself down' from the temple:[22] 'the thought arose in my mind', he says, to 'cast myself down on the rocks'. The thought arises that even in the idea of a thought arising in one's mind there is the thought of a satanic possession, of thoughts being devilishly not one's own. Suicide, in this respect, is represented as satanic, as an idea of possession, but one that is also always available and that indeed constitutes a permanent temptation to sin.[23]

We need carefully to unpack Stephen's reasoning. It is part of his argument, against Cranly, that one should follow a spiritual, non-materialistic lifestyle, and Stephen is trying to emphasize the idea that literature, for example, is important and not just an 'etc'. Jumping off the cliff at Howth is a temptation for the materialist because it would resolve the problem of living, a problem that can be eliminated by the destruction of the body.

The destruction of the body in suicide, in other words, is an ineluctably material, corporeal solution: suicide, the destruction or negation of the body, is in fact the ultimate act of embodiment. And this, indeed, is the realization that Stephen comes to in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in the course of what might be seen as the metaphorical bodily suicide of severe religious asceticism. Denying the body emphasizes it, celebrates it, fetishizes it. In *Stephen Hero*, Stephen identifies suicidality with an over-investment in certain forms of literature: 'To Jesus, to me, to the excitable person who adopts brigandage or suicide after taking the suggestions of literature too seriously (*SH* 222). He suggests that suicide is, or can be, prompted by literature, that literature has the power to tempt one to give up, to end one's life, while also denouncing such a response as faulty or fallacious – as the response of an 'excitable' or adolescent mentality, one beyond which he has moved.

In fact, however, Stephen seems never to overcome the temptation and is drawn towards just such a fall in his later incarnation in *Ulysses*. In 'Telemachus', Haines tells Stephen that the Martello tower at Sandycove, south of Dublin, and the low promontory on which it stands, 'remind [him] somehow of Elsinore', before quoting *Hamlet* act 1, scene 4: 'That beetles o'er his base into the sea' (*U* 18). In his speech, Horatio warns Hamlet that if he follows the ghost of his father he might be tempted towards self-slaughter, and the Shakespearian context reveals the implicit suicidality of Haines's allusion:

> What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,
> Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff
> That beetles o'er his base into the sea,
> And there assume some other horrible form
> Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason
> And draw you into madness? Think of it:
> The very place puts toys of desperation,
> Without more motive into every brain
> That looks so many fathoms to the sea
> And hears it roar beneath. (*Hamlet* 1.iv.69–78)

Horatio describes the temptation to leap that any cliff – at Elsinore or at Sandycove or elsewhere – constitutively offers. There is a slippage in the speech from the idea that the ghost might tempt Hamlet to leap from the cliff to the idea that the 'very place' might do so, and might do so inevitably, ineluctably, universally; a slippage from the idea that Hamlet might leap to the idea that the place itself puts 'toys of desperation' – the instruments of suicide – into '*every* brain'. Everyone and anyone might jump, whether or

not they are in mourning, whether or not they are suffering from depression, trauma, or melancholia. The place itself, just the place, makes suicide a temptation, 'without more motive', as if there is a necessary, unavoidable, and inescapable impulse in and as part of the human condition. Anyone standing at a place that offers the opportunity for easy and instant self-annihilation can act on an impulse that seems to come from beyond the self – from beyond reason, the conscious mind, or the will.

At this point in *Ulysses*, Joyce indicates that Haines is alluding specifically to *Stephen's* state of mind:

> Buck Mulligan turned suddenly for an instant towards Stephen but did not speak. In the bright silent instant Stephen saw his own image in cheap dusty mourning between their gay attires. (*U* 18)

Mulligan's sudden, quick, silent turn towards Stephen suggests that he has picked up on Haines's reference and has understood that Horatio's warning to Hamlet might also be needed as a warning to Stephen – that Stephen, like Hamlet, is a potential suicide. Stephen's vision of himself in 'dusty mourning', with its echo of Hamlet's 'customary suites of solemn black' (*Hamlet* 1.2.78), reinforces this sense of his self-identification as a Hamlet figure: both are in mourning for a parent, and both are potential suicides. Indeed, as 'Telemachus' ends, there is talk of a drowned man, and as Stephen concludes that he can neither stay at the Martello tower nor return to his parents' house, a voice, 'sweettoned and sustained', calls to him from the sea, and calls again, as if tempting him (he sees a 'sleek brown head' of a seal 'far out on the water') like the devil to his death (*U* 23).

Hamlet is a pervasive ghostly presence in *Ulysses*, an obsession, almost, of Stephen. No other Shakespeare play – and, with the obvious exception of the *Odyssey*, no other text – so haunts Joyce's novel.[24] Since *Hamlet* is English literature's archetypal suicide narrative, *Ulysses* may be considered to be recurrently, even obsessively concerned with the act. The discussion of *Hamlet* at the beginning of 'Scylla and Charybdis' therefore bears careful attention. The debate in the Dublin City Library mostly concerns Stephen's elaboration of his ideas about the opposition between the mind and the body, and the relevance of this opposition to his theory of art. In a self-reflexive turn, Joyce elaborates Stephen's idea that Shakespeare's writing is an indirect but implicitly autobiographical reflection on his life. But the discussion also turns on the question of suicide, beginning with another allusion to literary suicide and to the close association between literature and self-destruction. It is the 'urbane' librarian who raises the

matter, with a comment on Goethe's discussion of Shakespeare in *Wilhelm Meister*:

> – And we have, have we not, those priceless pages of *Wilhelm Meister*? A great poet on a great brother poet. A hesitating soul taking arms against a sea of troubles, torn by conflicting doubts, as one sees in real life. (*U* 176)

Joyce's librarian conflates Wilhelm Meister's argument that Hamlet is a 'lovely, pure, noble, and most moral nature' who lacks the 'strength of nerve' of a tragic hero and 'sinks beneath a burden it cannot bear and must not cast away' (quoted in *U* 828), with Hamlet's famous words as he contemplates 'taking arms against a sea of troubles' to end those troubles by killing himself. The language, the very language of literature in this passage is bound up with the rhetoric of suicide because it is inextricably tied to the most influential of all English works, Shakespeare's great suicide narrative, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*.

Stephen Dedalus II: 'silence, exile, and cunning'

Perhaps the clearest, most fully worked through, and most consequential expression of the relationship between suicide and art in Joyce appears in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The fact that in the last sentence of the novel Dedalus is rhetorically conflated with his son, the suicidally overreaching Icarus (the boy who flies too close to the sun despite his father's emphatic warnings and who performs a kind of suicide in his death-fall into the sea), strongly implies that artistic ambition and a form of self-slaughter (the suicidality of overreaching ambition) are synonymous. As I have suggested, the novel is more generally obsessed with falling, structured as it is around the figure of the fall in both local and large-scale ways: it is a novel in which the (suicidal) fall is always and everywhere possible. But the enactment of self-slaughter (intentional or not) is written into Joyce's autobiographical novel in other ways, to the extent that what the novel explores is not so much the Barthesian *death* of the author or Eliot's poetic 'impersonality' as the author-figure's *suicidality*.

The point is fundamental and remarkable even while it seems to have gone almost entirely unremarked in the novel's critical reception. In *Portrait*, Joyce elaborates a formal aesthetic theory in terms that clearly map the aesthetic onto a certain conception of authorial suicidality. The novel develops an aesthetics that insists, in the first place, on the *vocation* of art and the centrality (even in his annihilation) of the author figure. It is, indeed, this vocation of authorship that structures and even generates a teleological

narrative trajectory directed towards a final episode in which Stephen presents his fully formulated theory of authorship, of art, as a form of self-creation and self-destruction. In the final chapter of the novel, Stephen comes to the conclusion that the artist or author must reject 'home', 'fatherland', and 'church', famously concluding that the artist must adopt, instead, what he calls the 'arms' of 'silence, exile, and cunning'.[25] Critics have noted that the memorable phrase repeats an almost identical Latin phrase found in two novels by Honoré de Balzac, *Le Médecin de Campagne* (*The Country Doctor*) (1833), and *Splendeurs et Misères des Courtisanes* (*A Harlot High and Low*) (1847): in both of these novels the 'artistic' strategies of silence, exile, and cunning are explicitly and prominently articulated as a form of suicide. Those critics who have noted the allusion to Balzac's novels, however, have done little to elucidate the way in which Joyce's intertextual debt operates in *Portrait* and have certainly not dwelled on the slogan's expression of a certain suicidality.[26] But the distinct and unignorable echo of Balzac's use of the phrase '*fuge*, *late*, *tace*' (flight, subterfuge, silence) in Stephen's 'silence, exile, and cunning' has a particular resonance: both *The Country Doctor* and *A Harlot High and Low* are prominently and explicitly suicide narratives, and in both, the motto '*fuge, late, tace*' is employed in relation to characters who either literally or metaphorically commit suicide. To register the full force of the *Portrait*'s theory of authorship and artistic production, we therefore need to turn briefly to the source of Stephen's declaration in Balzac's novels.

In *A Country Doctor*, the eponymous doctor, Benassis, is rejected by Evelina, the woman he loves, because her parents disapprove of the match. After the relationship has ended, Benassis's illegitimate son by a former lover dies. Devastated by these disasters, he considers suicide, appealing to the Stoics for justification. 'They reasoned as follows', Benassis explains. 'Man differs from the brutes in being sovereign over his own person; remove from him the right over his own life and death, and you make him the slave of men and of events'.[27] But Benassis soon rethinks his action and, responding to a Christian rather than a pagan philosophy and ethics, decides that 'the courage that a man deploys in killing himself now seemed to me to be its own condemnation' and that 'if he has the strength to die, he ought to have the strength to fight'. Suicide, he decides, is therefore 'no longer . . . excusable, whatever the crisis' one faces.[28] Having made this decision, Benassis travels to the Carthusian monastery of Grand Chartreuse with the intention of dedicating his life to God. Entering the monastery, he reads an inscription above the door of a monk's cell 'with tenderness': 'all the precepts of the life I wanted to lead were summed up in those

three Latin words: *Fuge, late, tace* . . . ', he recalls.[29] Although he is struck by the motto, at the same time Benassis is appalled by the monk's life, considering it to have 'a kind of sublime egotism' since such a 'retreat' can 'only profit the individual': it is nothing other than 'a protracted suicide', he comments.[30] Having come to the realisation that monastic life simply replaces actual suicide with a virtual and protracted version of the act, Benassis decides instead to devote himself to the service of others as a country doctor: 'I entered the way of silence and resignation. The *fuge, late, tace* of Chartreuse is my maxim . . . my moral suicide is to the benefit of this district'.[31] As Balzac makes unmistakably clear, *fuge, late tace* – flight, subterfuge, silence – can be conceived both as a *form of* and as *an alternative to* suicide. The fundamental and explicit pact that the doctor makes in his retreat to a country practice is *both* an alternative to suicide – not suicide, indeed a way to avoid suicide – and itself a *form* of suicide. In effect, the doctor's decision to retreat to an obscure country practice is presented as a suicide at two removes: it is not suicide, and not the effective 'protracted suicide' of monastic life (a metaphorical suicide), but is still in effect a 'retreat' from the world – it is still, metaphorically, a form of suicide. Avoiding suicide, then, Benassis nevertheless embraces it, enacts it. The Carthusian brothers have 'egotistically' embarked upon a 'protracted suicide' in their decision to shut themselves away from the world in a life of silence and religious contemplation and compliance. By rejecting that choice, the doctor has paradoxically not rejected it since he effects his own form of death.[32]

The suicide motif and the motto '*fuge, late, tace*' appear again in *A Harlot High and Low*, another novel that revolves around the question of suicide. The protagonist is the once-idealistic poet Lucien de Rubempré, who also features in *Illusions Perdu* (1837–43), where, as a young man, he had considered killing himself. In *A Harlot High and Low*, both Lucien's lover, Esther, and Lucien himself do eventually commit suicide. Balzac's motto appears early on in *Harlot* to define Lucien's character and explain his strategy for survival. He tells the cynical journalist Blandot that he has 'adopted a maxim with which I trust to lead a quiet life: *Fuge, late, tace*!'[33] But the maxim cannot finally save the idealistic young poet from and may even be said to impel him towards cynicism, dissolution, disgrace, imprisonment, despair, and suicide. In other words, Balzac recycles his motto in *A Harlot* to define a strategy of survival that leads eventually and inexorably to suicide. In both novels, then, the phrase that Balzac himself came across on his visit to the Grande Chartreuse monastery, is used prominently to figure and explore the relationship between idealism (including the

idealism of the poet, the artist) and suicide: *fuge, late, tace* is the motto of self-annihilation.

Stephen's 'silence, exile, and cunning' is an almost exact translation of Balzac's Latin motto 'flight, subterfuge, silence', with the final term in Balzac's phrase placed first in Joyce's. There can be little doubt about the influence of Balzac on Joyce in this telling phrase nor of the way that the motto identifies the artist with self-annihilation. In *A Portrait*, Joyce famously develops a theory of artistic production and artistic identity that is itself a form of suicidality, describing the artist, after Flaubert, as a God-like, impersonalized entity, 'within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence'.[34] Metaphorical or literal suicide – self-annihilation – in Joyce is bound up in literature and art in a perhaps youthful, naïve, and self-regarding aestheticizing of the act by Stephen Dedalus. And in this sense, the aesthetic is a function of or dependent on suicide. That Joyce's great autobiographical project ends in a declaration that effectively announces, in his exile, a kind of authorial suicide, emphasizes the importance of self-destruction in his conception of the aesthetic and more generally in modernism's conception of 'impersonal' authorship.[35]

Dubliners: Love Death

Joyce's adoption and adaptation of Balzac's motto form, in effect, his response to Romantic and post-Romantic literary and philosophical debates over the aesthetic. Fundamental to such debates, from Kant onwards, is a concern with the conflict between art and commerce that is already at work in 'Tilly'. In its radical critique and rejection of instrumentalism, the aesthetic is inextricably bound up with commerce through an antipathy towards it. The opposition may indeed be said to determine Joyce's thinking throughout his work, and it features prominently in the two suicide stories in *Dubliners*, 'A Painful Case' and 'The Dead'. The shorter, more pointedly focused, sharper, if less well-known story, 'A Painful Case', has been described by Hugh Kenner as 'the first adumbration of "The Dead"' and by S. L. Goldberg as a 'self-comment on the tone of much of *Dubliners*'.[36] But the story has also been read as a recapitulation of the suicide theme in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, one of the major suicide texts in European literature. Despite Joyce's own view that 'A Painful Case' is one of the 'two worst stories in *Dubliners*' (*Letters* 2.189), it nevertheless presents one of his more important meditations on the artist and suicide.[37]

Recently dubbed by Cóilín Owens 'the most melancholy and the darkest story in *Dubliners*',[38] 'A Painful Case' tells of the relationship between Mr Duffy, a high-minded, puritanical aesthete, and the wife of a merchant sea captain, Mrs Sinico. Duffy is possibly a closeted or repressed homosexual who, like Joyce, works in a bank, reads Nietzsche, and has translated Gerhart Hauptmann's *Michael Kramer* (a play about a high-minded, puritanical aesthete whose son kills himself).[39] Duffy carefully separates himself from others and lives a life of austere narcissism, nourishing a Stephen Dedalus-like (and ultimately Joycean) 'autobiographical habit' of narrating the events of his life to himself in the third person. An instance of Durkheimian 'anomie', as Randy Malamud has argued, Duffy lives 'at a little distance from his body, regarding his own acts with doubtful side-glances'; his 'spiritual life' is lived 'without any communion with others'.[40] Meeting Mrs Sinico at a concert, he begins a platonic, self-regarding, and vaguely ethereal relationship with her, mainly consisting of self-regarding elaborations on his aesthetic theories:

> Sometimes he caught himself listening to the sound of his own voice. He thought that in her eyes he would ascend to an angelical stature; and, as he attached the fervent nature of his companion more and more closely to him, he heard the strange impersonal voice which he recognised as his own, insisting on the soul's incurable loneliness. We cannot give ourselves, it said: we are our own. (*D* 107)

Apparently moved by Duffy's intense, earnest spirituality, however, Mrs Sinico goes too far: erroneously interpreting Duffy's narcissist-aestheticist fervour as coded sexual desire for her, she takes hold of his hand 'passionately' and 'presse[s] it to her cheek' (*D* 107). Duffy's appalled response is to stop seeing her. Four years later, he comes across an account in a newspaper of the inquest into her death: Mrs Sinico has been killed while crossing a railway line. Although the verdict is that 'no blame attached to anyone' (*D* 111) it seems clear to Duffy at least that his erstwhile disciple, admirer, companion, friend, and potential lover has killed herself, and that at some level he is to blame for rejecting and abandoning her.[41] At first, Duffy is disgusted: 'Not merely had she degraded herself; she had degraded him' (*D* 111). Later, however, as he begins to wonder how – or *if* – he will be remembered after his death, his feelings begin to soften into regret: 'Why had he withheld life from her? Why had he sentenced her to death? . . . one human being had seemed to love him and he had denied her life and happiness: he had sentenced her to ignominy, a death of shame' (*D* 113).

The narrative concerns the failure of the aesthetic and artistic or intellectual life: the individual who attempts to hold everyday, bourgeois or commercial life, at arm's length is shown to fail utterly. But it may also be read as a commentary on early modernist discourses of suicide and suicide denial. The 'painful case' of Mrs Sinico's death, as reported in the newspaper, is judged to be 'accidental' by the coroner at the inquest (*D* 111). On the one hand, this judgement excludes suicide: Mrs Sinico died of heart failure; the train was moving slowly, not fast enough to kill her; her seeming negligence is explained by the fact that she had been drinking. On the other hand, the verdict draws on a recognizable trope of public discourse: the coroner and the newspaper use an accepted and acceptable euphemism for suicide, relying on a lack of evidence to ensure that an action open to the interpretation of suicide does not suffer the opprobrium of being categorized as such.[42] In other words, despite the judicial wording, the death can and should be read as a suicide. Certainly, Duffy's response to the event allows us to understand that he *believes* that Mrs Sinico committed suicide and that he was responsible for that death: 'Why had he sentenced her to death?' (*D* 113). In this regard, Joyce's story is alert to and engages with culturally encoded discourses of suicide denial. The story is concerned not so much with Emily Sinico's suicide as with various responses to the act, including the discourse of newspaper reports and Duffy's heightened, aesthetically scrupulous, not to say self-regardingly narcissistic response.

'A Painful Case' suggests the danger of abandoning or rejecting 'life' (including love, passion, attachment to others) for art – the danger for others, in the first place, but also for oneself. The point is made quietly, allusively, but forcefully as the story ends. Seeing two 'venal and furtive' lovers lying by the wall of the park, Duffy feels that he has been 'outcast from life's feast' (*D* 113). Critics have pointed to the prominence of the language and imagery of food, eating, and feasting in this story, and the phrase, repeated twice in the story's penultimate paragraph, might even suggest that being 'outcast from life's feast' involves being outcast from *life*: Duffy has effectively killed himself in his 'artistic' withdrawal from other people. To live, the story suggests, *is* to live in relation to others. But Duffy is alone: 'He felt that he was alone', the story ends (*D* 114). The curiously mechanical insistence on the word 'he' in the story's final paragraph seems almost to dehumanize Duffy, repeating or performing in its linguistic texture his sense that in the 'laborious drone' of the distant goods train he can hear 'the syllables of her name':

> He turned back the way he had come, the rhythm of the engine pounding in his ears. He began to doubt the reality of what memory told him. He

> halted under a tree and allowed the rhythm to die away. He could not feel her near him in the darkness nor her voice touch his ear. He waited for some minutes listening. He could hear nothing: the night was perfectly silent. He listened again: perfectly silent. He felt that he was alone. (*D* 114)

Although Duffy can hear nothing, what we can hear and in a sense what he writes (since he has a habit of writing in the third person; since we can therefore even surmise that he is writing this, his own, story)[43] is the engine-like sound of the anaphoric 'He . . . He . . . He . . . ' In other words, the suicide, Mrs Sinico, has been replaced with the 'virtual' suicide – the already effectively dead, self-annihilated – James Duffy.[44]

Like a number of other stories in *Dubliners*, 'A Painful Case' reappears briefly in *Ulysses*, where the death of Mrs Sinico is alluded to three times. In 'Ithaca' Bloom repeats the judicial verdict by asking Stephen an 'inconsequent polysyllabic question' about whether he had known Mrs Sinico who was 'accidentally killed at Sydney railway station, 14 October 1903' (*U* 648). Later in the same episode, he comes across a shilling piece 'placed there (presumably) on the occasion (17 October 1903)[45] of the interment of Mrs Emily Sinico, Sydney Parade' (*U* 663). We might wonder how 'inconsequential' the question is in fact: nothing about death is inconsequential for Bloom, a man who seems haunted, in particular, by the suicide of his father. Indeed, it is this link between the apparent suicide of Mrs Sinico and the suicide of Bloom's father that is emphasized in the first reference to Mrs Sinico in *Ulysses* and that gives the lie to Bloom's assertion of the death as 'accidental'. Towards the end of 'Hades', as Bloom walks towards the cemetery gates to leave, he reflects on the effect of visiting cemeteries:

> Enough of this place. Brings you a bit nearer every time. Last time I was here was Mrs Sinico's funeral. Poor papa too. The love that kills. (*U* 110)

Mrs Sinico and 'Poor papa' seem to be linked in Bloom's mind not only because they are dead but because they are suicides – and even because both can be thought of as victims of 'the love that kills'. 'Poor papa too' does not refer to Rudolph being buried in this cemetery in Dublin (since his grave is in Ennis, in County Clare), but rather to the fact that Bloom's father, like Mrs Sinico, is a suicide. The phrase, then, explicitly presents Emily Sinico as a suicide. And this might also help to account for the seemingly random phrase, 'the love that kills'. The phrase can credibly be traced to the title of a novel by the once-prominent Irish playwright, artist, and novelist G. W. Wills.[46] *The Love that Kills* (1867) is set in rural Ireland (near Waterford) in 1848. The now almost entirely forgotten novel features a tale of obsessive love that takes place against the background of famine in Ireland, social and

political unrest, and French revolutionary fever. William Clayton, a local lawyer, falls in love with Ellen Rae, the daughter of a landowner. Ellen is fond of Clayton, but does not return his love and is anyway betrothed to one of Clayton's clients, the wealthy landlord Tom Armstrong. Chapter 18 in the second volume of this worthy but somewhat implausible three-decker is titled 'The Love that Kills' and functions as the crux of the whole narrative. In this chapter, Clayton accosts Ellen as she is walking near the river and threatens to jump into the water with her and drown them both if she will not agree to accompany him to the local parish priest to be married: 'I'll teach you at last how great my love is', he tells her, 'You set nothing by it now. See what it has driven me to! Life – honour – can't stand before it'.[47] However, a local man happens upon the couple and, realizing what is afoot, intervenes to foil Clayton's plan and free Ellen. Clayton continues on to the priest and confesses. He repents of his actions and undergoes extreme penance before converting his passion for Ellen into a passion for humanity. Like James Joyce and Stephen Dedalus after him, Clayton exiles himself to Paris, where he raises funds for the poor and starving in Ireland, finally achieving a kind of redemption in his humanitarian but decidedly unrevolutionary actions. The specific allusion to the title of Wills's novel in *Ulysses* is not just another intertextual reference to suicide (murder-suicide in this case) but also points to a key element in Joyce's conception of romantic love. Love, for Joyce, is to die for – to be killed and to kill. Love is *Liebestod*. Like art, love is a suicidal mode or emotion; love prompts or generates suicide.[48]

Artistic suicide merges with *Liebestod*, then, and both are recurrent themes in Joyce. Joycean *Liebestod* is apparent in his love of Wagnerian opera and is repeatedly played out or referred to in poems, in *Exiles*, and in his prose fiction. The theme is notable in *Giacomo Joyce*, for example, which refers to Belluouro rising from 'his wife's lover's wife' to see the latter 'astir, sloe-eyed, a saucer of acetic acid in her hand'.[49] If we are in any doubt of the use to which the chemical is to be put (it is commonly used as a cleaning agent but also, because of its domestic availability, as a typically female-coded poison), the next sentences confirm suicide as a possibility by referring to the eponymous character in Ibsen's play who not only encourages another to kill himself but also ends by killing herself: 'A girl on horseback. Hedda! Hedda Gabler!'[50]

Before *Ulysses*, however, the most important narrative of love-death in Joyce's oeuvre was the centrepiece in *Dubliners*, its final story 'The Dead'. While it might be a truism to say that the dead govern and pervade 'The Dead', what has been less well recognized by critics is the way that a certain mode of death – self-sacrifice or self-slaughter, suicide – impels the

narrative, particularly as it moves towards its conclusion. Suicide is the end towards which both Gabriel Conroy and Michael Furey move. Suicide is where this story, and where *Dubliners* as a whole, ends: suicide is the story's and even the collection's teleological desire, and it may be understood to be an escape – the ultimate escape – from the condition of paralysis that pervades the city's inhabitants. Inasmuch as it resolves, *Dubliners* resolves in the idea of suicide.

While suicidality in the story is somewhat veiled, in Joyce's *sources*, suicide is explicit, direct, unequivocal. Characteristically it is in the space between Joyce's story and his sources that meanings emerge with regard to the difficult, almost inexpressible question of suicide. And yet critics of Joyce have alluded to but turned away from the suicidality of 'The Dead'. Richard Ellmann, for example, suggests that the ending to Joyce's story is adapted from George Moore's 1895 novel *Vain Fortune*, which concerns a couple who hear on their wedding night of the suicide of a woman who has earlier been jilted by the groom. Ellmann argues that Joyce 'transforms' the events of Moore's narrative and 'rarefies the situation' so that it arises 'not from a suicide but from a memory of young love'.[51] In other words, Ellmann both raises the spectre of and denies Joyce's intertextual engagement with suicide in 'The Dead', while at the same time implying that there is something vaguely vulgar about suicide that Joyce's more aesthetically refined narrative avoids. It is a somewhat curious take on a story that is resolved in the meaning of a young man (Michael Furey) killing himself for a young woman (Gretta). Ellmann's reading seems to overlook a fundamental fact about 'The Dead', which insists on Furey's suicidality, even though Gretta explicitly declares that Furey died *for* her: 'I think he died for me . . . I implored of him to go home at once and told him he would get his death in the rain. But he said he did not want to live' (*D* 221, 223). Gabriel subsequently remembers the conversation as Gretta sleeps: 'a man had died for her sake', he recalls; hers is 'no longer the face for which Michael Furey had braved death' (*D* 223). 'Locked' in Gretta's heart is the image of 'her lover's eyes when he had told her that he did not wish to live' (*D* 224). While Ellmann suggests that 'The Dead' 'transforms' and 'refines' Moore's narrative, it is precisely through the theme of suicide (or at least of suicidality) that Joyce may be said to repeat Moore's narrative, to restore it, to revitalize it. To die 'for' someone by refusing to go home, to aver that one does not want to live but would prefer to die for the sake of another, means that to 'brave' death is directly and unequivocally a question of suicide.[52]

But 'The Dead' can also be understood to revolve around the displaced or transferred suicidality of Gabriel Conroy. What Gabriel learns from

Gretta's suicide narrative is that the true, pure, transcendental lover is prepared to die for love and will kill himself for it, that love *is Liebestod* – love-death (love *of* death, love *unto* death, love *to* death). When Gabriel hears that Furey has told Gretta that he does not want to live without her, Gabriel's response is to feel that he had 'never felt like that himself towards any woman', while also, at the same time, *knowing* that 'such a feeling must be love' (*D* 224). Gabriel, in other words, knows two things: that he has never loved (because he has never been willing to kill himself for love) and that there is no love, no true love between a man and a woman without the wish, the desire, for death. To love is to want to die if one cannot possess the object of one's love. Paradoxically, this realization itself leads to what might be interpreted as the desire for and even, in a sense, the enactment of suicide. As Gabriel meditates on Gretta's story and on the failure of his own life, his failure to love, to feel passion, to risk life for love – his failure, indeed, to have killed himself for Gretta – he comes to the conclusion that Wordsworth came to a century earlier in 'Resolution and Independence' (1807) when he celebrated the early death of the suicide-poet Thomas Chatterton: the realization that it is better to 'pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age' (*D* 224).[53] In the final two paragraphs of 'The Dead', this sense of the desirability of a youthful, passionate death and the fear of its opposite, the lamentable fading into a mediocre and passionless middle age, are merged into a form of suicide yearning or decision or desire: 'The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward', Gabriel thinks. While the West is strongly marked in 'The Dead' as linked to a certain Irish nationality or nationalism, it is also the land of death, of the dead: Gabriel is deciding, also, that this is his time to die or to start or set out to die. And as he thinks this, as he makes this decision, he begins metaphorically, in language or in his imagination, to enact it, to enact the falling and fading of death: his 'identity' begins 'fading out', his soul 'swoons' slowly, falling like the snow outside the window (*D* 224–5). Gabriel's response to his wife's narrative of love-suicide, *Liebestod*, then, is both to desire and, in a certain sense, to (re-)enact the lover's suicide, to will a fading, a death, a journey 'westward'.[54]

Ulysses: 'A few pastilles of aconite'

In Joyce, then, suicide is bound up with art, with the aesthetic, and with authorial identity; as a form of *Liebestod*, it is also a driving force in and of narrative and is conceived of as a culturally instituted dimension of desire.

But beyond, and in part *because* of this, suicide is also presented as a permanent, recurrent temptation or possibility, a permanent, ineradicable, and even tragic aspect of what it means to be alive. In *Ulysses*, suicide appears at numerous moments and in various ways and is, in particular, part of everyday experience for the novel's protagonist, Leopold Bloom. Suicide in Joyce is not only exceptional, artistic, or tragic but also quotidian.

Suicide, one might say, is permanently on Bloom's mind, whether he is awake or not. In 'Ithaca' we learn that even in his dreams he is haunted by the fear of suicide:

> What did he fear?
>
> The committal of homicide or suicide during sleep by an aberration of the light of reason, the incommensurable categorical intelligence situated in the cerebral convolutions. (*U* 672)[55]

This strange, apparently permanent, pervasive fear, this anxiety about suicide even as an unconscious or unintentional act, even in sleep, focuses a number of concerns in the novel and emphasizes the importance of suicide in Joyce's sense of everyday life. But suicide also appears and reappears at specific points throughout Bloom's long day, and it is worth briefly exploring a number of moments of suicide ideation in *Ulysses* to establish the pervasiveness of the *topos* in Joyce's major novel.

Neil Davison has commented that references to Italo Svevo as 'a model for Bloom' have become 'standard fare in Joyce studies', not least because both Bloom and Svevo are of Jewish Hungarian extraction.[56] This identification has important implications and consequences for our understanding of suicidality in Joyce and may be said to confirm our sense that self-slaughter is a major but largely unacknowledged question in *Ulysses*. Svevo's 1892 novel *Una Vita* features the suicide of Alfonso Nitti, a bank clerk (as Joyce himself was in Rome in 1906–7, and as Duffy is in 'A Painful Case'), and Davison argues that, in reading the novel, Joyce was alerted to the significance of Schopenhauer's argument that suicide is an ultimately futile or indeed self-defeating assertion of the will: it is not a 'denial of the will' but its 'emphatic affirmation'.[57] But as Davison also points out, Svevo seems to have triggered, or perhaps crystallized Joyce's ideas about 'Jewish suicide': when Svevo died in a car crash in 1928, Joyce wrote to Harriet Shaw that 'in the case of Jews I always suspect suicide'.[58] Although the letter is written some years after the publication of *Ulysses*, Joyce's assertion that he *always* suspects suicide 'in the case of Jews' allows for the possibility that this suspicion accounts for key aspects of Leopold Bloom's particular cultural identity. If Jews can always be suspected of suicide or if Joyce

can always suspect them – the phrasing is ambiguous – then Bloom's Jewish heritage itself marks him as a potential suicide. Such a reading is supported by the identification of Jewishness with suicide in *Giacomo Joyce*. In this short autobiographical text, Joyce's narrator visits the grave of Pimply Meisel's 'suicide wife' in the 'holy field' of the Jews and links this individual death to 'her people' more generally: 'Corpses of Jews lie about me rotting in the mould of their holy field. Here is the tomb of her people, black stone, silence without hope . . . The tomb of her people and hers: black stone, silence without hope'.[59] In other words, the decision to make Bloom Jewish (at least in cultural heritage) may be linked to Joyce's sense of the constitutive suicidality of the Jewish people. If Bloom is not himself suicidal, he is at least a culturally and genetically coded suicide.[60]

One of Leopold Bloom's preoccupations on 16 June 1904 is the death of his father, the Hungarian Jew Rudolph (Virag) Bloom, who committed suicide in 1886. Memories of or references to the death of Rudolph occur throughout the day, from just after 8 A.M. to 2 A.M. the following morning.[61] Indeed, thoughts of his father's death go on occurring even after Bloom falls asleep, since Molly also ponders it as she lies awake next to her husband (*U* 718). Intertwined with allusions to and echoes of other texts and sometimes only decipherable as suicide references in the context of such works, suicidality punctuates the thoughts of Bloom as he goes about his business throughout the day.

The first reference to Rudolph's suicide occurs in 'Calypso' as Bloom walks towards the corner of Brunswick Street. He sees a hoarding advertising the American actress Millicent Bandmann-Palmer's starring role in Salomon Hermann Mosenthal's anti-anti-Semitic play *Leah the Forsaken* (1862). Bloom has previously seen Bandmann-Palmer in the same role, it seems, and although he does not refer explicitly to the play's ending (in which the protagonist dies by self-immolation), his thoughts wander to her performance as Hamlet and to Ophelia's suicide, and from there ineluctably to his father's death:

> Hello. *Leah* tonight: Mrs Bandman Palmer. Like to see her in that again. *Hamlet* she played last night. Male impersonator. Perhaps he was a woman. Why Ophelia committed suicide? Poor papa! How he used to talk about Kate Bateman in that! (*U* 73)

Responding to Bandmann-Palmer's actual performance as Hamlet in Dublin's Gaiety Theatre on 15 June 1904, and picking up on the Victorian tradition of women playing Hamlet and the curious apocryphal idea that Hamlet *was* in fact a woman and that Ophelia may have killed herself

because of that realization, Joyce allows Bloom's thoughts to jump to his father's death ('Poor papa!'), as if the word 'suicide' immediately triggers that thought.[62] Bloom goes on to recall his father's interest in Mosenthal's *Leah*, including his habit of quoting from the play and his assurance to Leopold that 'Every word' of the play is 'so deep' (ibid). But Bloom's mind returns ineluctably and unstoppably to his father's suicide:

> Poor papa! Poor man! I'm glad. I didn't go into the room to look at his face. That day! O dear! O dear! Ffoo! Well, perhaps it was the best for him.
>
> Mr Bloom went round the corner and passed the dropping nags of the hazard. No use thinking of it any more. Nosebag time. Wish I hadn't met that M'Coy fellow. (ibid.)

There is a sense in which Bloom seems to wish it were 'nosebag time' for himself as well: he wishes that he was a horse on the street corner with his snout in a nosebag, not thinking of anything very much, least of all of his father's death. Although there is 'no use thinking about it', thinking about it is precisely what Bloom goes on doing and what he cannot stop doing. Even though there is no use thinking about suicide, even *when* he is thinking there is no use thinking about it, he is thinking about it. Thoughts of his father's suicide punctuate Bloomsday and may even be said in some ways to ground Bloom's sense of his own existence, to form his identity, his very being, as the son of a suicide.

In this sense, the novel tells us something of the way that a life can be governed, determined, defined by mourning, even in the context of a death that occurred, as in this case, almost eighteen years earlier.[63] How often does a suicide survivor – someone who has survived the suicide of a loved one – think about that death? Bloom, for one, consciously considers or refers to his father's suicide (even, or especially, when he is thinking that there is no use thinking about it, when he is trying not to think about it) on at least eleven separate occasions during the day.[64] Although he refers to the fact that he is soon to travel to Ennis in County Clare to mark the anniversary of his father's death (itself a remarkably filial habit or routine eighteen years on), this particular day is not in other ways out of the ordinary. If we were to take 16 June 1904 as typical and extrapolate from its frequent references to Rudolph's suicide, Bloom could be said to think about his father's death more than four thousand times a year, even now, almost half a lifetime later – and to have thought about it more than seventy-thousand times in the years since it happened.[65] Given that Bloom takes his father's name (Virag, Hungarian for 'flower') as his pen name when he writes to his lover as Henry Flower, one might even say that he is driven to take on his

father's identity.[66] His identity is co-substantial with that of his father, the preeminent event of whose life, at least for his son (since he often thinks of it when he thinks of 'poor papa', even in the habitual phrase 'poor papa'), involves his leaving of it, his suicide.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, it is the 'Hades' episode, centering on Paddy Dignam's funeral, that is the most profusely punctuated by references to the deaths of Bloom's infant son, Rudy, and his father, Rudolph.[67] The death of his father in particular is prominently in Bloom's thoughts as he travels to the funeral with Martin Cunningham, Mr Power, and Simon Dedalus. The first reference appears early on in the episode, as Bloom notices a dog's home:

> Poor old Athos! Be good to Athos, Leopold, is my last wish. Thy will be done. We obey them in the grave. A dying scrawl. He took it to heart, pined away. Quiet brute. Old men's dogs usually are. (*U* 87)

The command to look after Athos seems to be from Rudolph's suicide note, which appears a number of times in *Ulysses*: a few pages later, there is a reference to a letter 'For my son Leopold' in the context of the inquest into Rudolph's death (*U* 93), and in the penultimate section of *Ulysses* there is a more extended quotation from this letter, as Bloom remembers a few phrases from it while he is preparing for bed (*U* 676). At this point, it is the dog's home that evokes the memory of Rudolph's dog, Athos, and then the suicide note that commands Bloom to take care of the dog and the apparent canine parasuicide of a creature that 'took it to heart' and 'pined away' (somewhat like his almost-namesake Argos in *The Odyssey*) when his owner died.

The fullest and most explicit passage on suicide in *Ulysses*, however, comes a few pages later and is prompted unwittingly by Bloom himself. Mr Power responds to a remark that Bloom makes on sudden death, suggesting that a death like Paddy Dignam's is the 'best death' because there is 'no suffering': 'a moment and all is over' (*U* 92), Bloom says in one of several observations on the benefits of euthanasia that he makes during the day. After the mourners watch a child's coffin pass by on a hearse, Mr Power comes back to Bloom's remark: 'But the worst of all, Mr Power said, is the man who takes his own life' (*U* 93). Since Cunningham is aware of the fact that Bloom's father has killed himself, there ensues a conversation in which Mr Power and Simon Dedalus express their socially and theologically sanctioned condemnation of suicide while Cunningham attempts to ameliorate Bloom's pain and his own embarrassment:

> Martin Cunningham drew out his watch briskly, coughed and put it back.
>
> – The greatest disgrace to have in the family, Mr Power added.
> – Temporary insanity, of course, Martin Cunningham said decisively. We must take a charitable view of it.
> – They say a man who does it is a coward, Mr Dedalus said.
> – It is not for us to judge, Martin Cunningham said. (*U* 93)

Alert to the nuances of judgement and prejudice in this as in other conversations, Bloom thinks of Cunningham tautologically as a 'Sympathetic human man', considering him to be like Shakespeare (in common parlance the chameleon-like archetype of human sympathy and empathy), while also dwelling on the social construction of suicide in Catholic Ireland:

> They have no mercy on that here or infanticide. Refuse Christian burial. They used to drive a stake of wood through his heart in the grave. As if it wasn't broken already. Yet sometimes they repent too late. Found in the riverbed clutching rushes. (ibid.)

There is much going on in these fraught sentences. Bloom's thoughts involve a mixture of historical and contemporary ideas and misstatements, of fantasy and half-remembered information. The reference to 'infanticide' is oddly incongruous, since the idea that one might have mercy on child killers seems to sit uneasily with the idea that one might forgive a suicide. And yet the word – apparently a malapropism triggered by Bloom's memory of his son's death and by seeing the hearse bearing a child's coffin – also gestures towards a deeper philosophical and anthropological consideration of specific cultural practices (infanticide being widespread in primitive societies including, indeed, Homeric Greece). Developing this idea of the historical and cultural specificity of suicide practices and treatment, Bloom comically confounds the metaphorical with the literal and distances himself from Irish religious and cultural norms, referring to the early modern practice of impaling a suicide's heart in the grave, on the one hand, and to the heart as figuratively 'broken' by grief, on the other hand. The heart that is broken in this sense offers the reader an initial glimpse of one of the major concerns in the novel, a concern that is, as I shall argue, profoundly influenced by Joyce's own father: the widower, whether Rudolph Bloom or John Stanislaus Joyce, as a victim of 'the love that kills'. Clutching at straws, however, Bloom also appeals to an image from *Hamlet* of Ophelia being 'found in the river bed'. Bloom's version of the image has Ophelia 'clutching at rushes', as if in last-minute repentance. Bloom seems to be

referring to a final hope or wish not so much that his dead father might not be dead, but that he might somehow be saved from the religious and legal condemnation and indeed from the social stigma of suicide, wishing that he might have attempted to save himself at the last minute, since the suicide who 'repents' too late is, in effect, not a suicide at all, but instead someone who suffers 'death by misadventure'.

After further consideration of the Sisyphean figure of Martin Cunningham, Bloom recalls the inquest following his father's death, as Joyce carefully reveals the personal motivation that governs his protagonist's relativistic consideration of the social, historical, and cultural construction of suicide:

> That afternoon of the inquest. The redlabelled bottle on the table. The room in the hotel with hunting pictures. Stuffy it was. Sunlight through the slats of the Venetian blinds. The coroner's ears, big and hairy. Boots giving evidence. Thought he was asleep first. Then saw like yellow streaks on his face. Had slipped down to the foot of the bed. Verdict: overdose. Death by misadventure. The letter. For my son Leopold.
>
> No more pain. Wake no more. Nobody owns. (ibid.)

The paragraph merges three memories: the scene of the suicide, the inquest, and a jingle that has been running through these paragraphs in tribute to the hearse of a child that the mourners have passed on the way to the funeral, Thomas Noel's mid-nineteenth-century poem, 'The Pauper's Drive' ('Rattle his bones over the stones! / He's only a pauper, whom nobody owns!'). Noel's poem ends with the uplifting thought that the pauper will be 'owned' in death by his 'Maker', reinforcing the euthanastic idea of suicide as a relief from suffering ('No more pain. Wake no more'). The bottle on the table and the room in the hotel with hunting pictures are from the inquest, from which the most important detail is the letter. It is only much later in the day that the contents of Rudolph's last letter are revealed, but there is a sense in which the letter, with its melancholy, despairing message, haunts Bloom, from the time of the funeral (and indeed before it) until he retires to bed. Rudolph's suicide note and Bloom's response to it present an important ethical and psychological riposte to the misplaced but socially sanctioned moralism of Mr Power and Simon Dedalus. 'No more pain': the refrain from Noel's ditty sums up an important alternative response to suicide as based on sympathy and empathy, to suicide as an escape from intolerable mental torment, from permanent, ineradicable, and incurable mourning. In 'Circe', the reader learns that, as an adolescent, Bloom contemplated suicide as a form of euthanasia, as a release from

suffering (see *U* 513–14), and his own experience seems to influence his sympathetic response to his father's death. If suicide is what Bloom thinks of first and last when he thinks of Rudolph, the dominant emotions provoked by that thought are of pity and sympathy. Bloom conceives of suicide as a form of relief, as euthanasia, as a release from the suffering of living, from the pain of life, as the fulfilment of a desire for suffering that will be no more.[68]

A few pages later, Cunningham whispers to Mr Power that he was 'in mortal agony with you talking of suicide before Bloom', and the reader can begin to understand his embarrassment over his friends' condemnation of suicide and retrospectively to see why he attempted to justify or explain or understand the act (*U* 98). We also learn that Bloom is planning to go to Ennis in County Clare to commemorate the anniversary of his father's death, a reference that clarifies Bloom's earlier remark that he had to 'go down to the county Clare on some private business' (*U* 90).[69] The next reference, otherwise inexplicable, briefly repeats the idea of suicide as shameful and is inspired by the sound of a donkey's bray: 'Never see a dead one, they say. Shame of death. They hide. Also poor papa went away' (*U* 106). Elsewhere, Rudolph is represented as killing himself in his own hotel in Ennis, rather than going away to do so. But this idea of 'poor papa' going away to die, to kill himself, again evokes a certain moving animality in the retrospective, mutually protective sympathy between son and father. The idea of the shame, and the shameful nature, of suicide returns in 'Cyclops', where Bloom is forcefully reminded of the disgrace that suicide entails, for the individual and for the family, within the social and religious milieu of Catholic Dublin. Necessarily under suspicion as a Jew of Hungarian origin, Bloom is also rumoured to be involved in the nationalist Sinn Fein's violent or revolutionary activities.[70] And he is seen as cheating and fraudulent, like his father before him. Rudolph is said to 'perpetrate' frauds: 'old Methusalem Bloom, the robbing bagman, that poisoned himself with prussic acid after scamping his country with his baubles and his penny diamonds' (*U* 321).[71] Suicide, according to this anti-Semitic thinking, is a form of fraud that robs the righteous of just punishment or retribution.

If Bloom's thoughts about his father are prominent in the 'Hades' episode, they are also perhaps at work in an oddly uncomfortable moment when he attempts to recount a supposedly humorous anecdote about another suicide attempt. Death by drowning is a recurrent motif in *Ulysses* and is archetypally suicidal in that (like death by falling) it is easily available, relatively certain, quick, supposedly pain-free, and, in itself almost always ambiguous, undecidably suicidal.[72] Despite – or because of – his

sensitivity to questions of suicide and Jewish identity, one of the ways that Bloom attempts to integrate with his fellow mourners on the way to Paddy Dignam's funeral is to tell the 'good', 'funny' anti-Semitic story of the attempted suicide of Reuben Dodd Jr, as they pass Dodd Sr in the street:

> – That's an awfully good one that's going the rounds about Reuben J. and the son.
> – About the boatman? Mr Power asked.
> – Yes. Isn't it awfully good?
> – What is that? Mr Dedalus asked, I didn't hear it.
> – There was a girl in the case, Mr Bloom began, and he determined to send him to the Isle of Man out of harm's way but when they were both . . .
> – What? Mr Dedalus asked. That confirmed bloody hobbledehoy is it?
> – Yes, Mr Bloom said. They were both on the way to the boat and he tried to drown . . .
> – Drown Barabbas! Mr Dedalus cried. I wish to Christ he did!
>
> Mr Power sent a long laugh down his shaded nostrils.
>
> – No, Mr Bloom said, the son himself . . .
>
> Martin Cunningham thwarted his speech rudely.
>
> – Reuben J. and the son were piking it down the quay next the river on their way to the isle of Man boat and the young chiseller suddenly got loose and over the wall with him into the Liffey.
> – For God's sake! Mr Dedalus exclaimed in fright. Is he dead?
> – Dead! Martin Cunningham cried. Not he! A boatman got a pole and fished him out by the slack of the breeches and he was landed up to the father on the quay. More dead than alive. Half the town was there.
> – Yes, Mr Bloom said. But the funny part is . . .
> – And Reuben J., Martin Cunningham said, gave the boatman a florin for saving his son's life. (*U* 91)[73]

The interruptions by his fellow mourners, particularly the obstreperous anti-Semitic thwarting of his telling by the otherwise sympathetic human man Martin Cunningham, confirm Bloom's outsider status and the general uneasiness of this moment.[74] Even, or especially, in relation to the question of suicide, Bloom is unable to integrate into, to become properly part of the society in which he lives. His father's suicide, like his Jewish and Hungarian origins, marks him as an outsider in turn-of-the-century Dublin.

As it happens, the story of Reuben Dodd Jr returns, like the repressed, in 'Circe', and like the repressed it appears in a distorted, dream-like form

(perhaps for Bloom the dream constitutes the fulfilment of a wish), when instead of being saved and the butt of humour, the younger Dodd is imagined as dead: Dodd senior appears in 'Circe' as a 'blackbearded Iscariot, bad shepherd, bearing on his shoulders the drowned corpse of his son' (*U* 469). One might conclude that within the dream logic of this scene, Bloom's inevitable Semitic identification with Dodd Jr transfers the *successful* suicide of his own father to himself.

Suicide in fact appears on several other occasions in 'Circe'. The ghost of Bloom's father appears with the 'Yellow poison streaks' on his face that were mentioned at the inquest, suggesting that his very appearance is defined by his suicide (*U* 416). And suicide, in the most general terms, seems to be on Bloom's mind in this episode. At one point, for example, Zoe, the prostitute, asks Bloom for a cigarette (a 'swaggerroot'; *U* 451), at which Bloom 'lewdly' declares,'The mouth can be better engaged than with a cylinder of rank weed' (ibid.). Zoe satirically invites Bloom to make a 'stump speech' on the topic, which he does, dwelling on the self-defeating nature of human endeavour ('Mankind is incorrigible', he declares; *U* 452). His examples include the introduction from the New World of both the disease-beating potato and tobacco, the 'poisoner of the ear, eye, heart, memory, will, understanding, all': 'That is to say', Bloom declares, that Sir Walter Raleigh 'brought the poison a hundred years before another person whose name I forget brought the food. Suicide. Lies. All our habits. Why, look at our public life!' (*U* 450). The incorrigible, self-defeating nature of human endeavour, symbolized by the introduction of both the potato and tobacco, food and poison, from the New World, includes the (human) 'habits' of politics, of lying – and, notably, of suicide. All human habits, according to the speech, have this double, self-defeating quality, all habits, including the human habit of suicide. In a profound sense, the modern human 'habit' of suicide is fundamentally double in that its achievement – in Schopenhauer's terms, the assertion of the individual will – is also its failure: the end of the individual and his or her will.

Suicide is also dramatically enacted in 'Circe' by the Veiled Sybil, who stabs herself and dies – an act that is followed by a comic enumeration of the ways in which 'attractive and enthusiastic women' commit suicide (including poisoning by 'prussic acid, aconite, arsenic'; *U* 464). Later, Bloom thinks again of his father's suicide as he dreams of or hallucinates emigrating and then quotes *Hamlet*. The dream merges into memories of his father's inquest as Bloom's voice merges with Rudolph's (and with Hamlet's):

> To be or not to be. Life's dream is o'er. End it peacefully. They can live on. (*He gazes far away mournfully*.) I am ruined. A few pastilles of aconite. The blinds drawn. A letter. Then lie back to rest. (*He breathes softly*.) No more. I have lived. Fare. Farewell. (*U* 470)

In a curious, hallucinatory moment that seems somehow to repeat the merger of Dedalus with Icarus at the end of *Portrait*, Bloom *becomes* his father;[75] he enacts and voices his father's suicide, both repeating his father's (imagined or remembered) final words or thoughts and speaking them, thinking them, on his own account, breathing softly, dying: 'No more. I have lived. Fare. Farewell'.

Bloom also recalls thoughts of suicide that he has had on his own account. He remembers being unattractive to girls as an adolescent and going to Howth Head (or imagining going there) to throw himself from the cliff:

> (*He gazes intently downwards on the water*.) Thirtytwo head over heels per second. Press nightmare. Giddy Elijah. Fall from cliff. Sad end of government printer's clerk. *(Through silversilent summer air the dummy of Bloom, rolled in a mummy, rolls roteatingly from the Lion's Head cliff into the purple waiting waters.)*
>
> THE DUMMYMUMMY
>
> Bbbbbllllllbbbbblblobschbg! (*U* 514)

In other words, it is not only Stephen Dedalus but also Leopold Bloom who thinks about throwing himself off the cliffs at Howth Head, a place that has 'its own toll of deaths by falling off the cliffs by design or accidentally' (*U* 583).[76] And we might surmise that the cliffs, so close to Dublin and visible from the docks, from the bay, and from the Martello tower at Sandycove, function as a perpetual threat or reminder of or temptation to self-slaughter.

The most detailed and specific references to the suicide of his father, however, occur to Bloom towards the end of the day in Bloom's final episode, 'Ithaca'. Here, as Stephen and Leopold talk in Bloom's Eccles Street house, an apparently random reference to a piece of advertising featuring two 'smartly dressed girls' who are 'seated engaged in writing' sparks off for Stephen the fantasy of a scene of writing in a 'Solitary hotel' in a mountain pass. The hotel is called the 'Queen's Hotel', and the name in turn telepathically triggers, in *Bloom*'s mind, the scene of his father's death in the Queen's Hotel in Ennis (the two hotels' 'homonymity' being

attributed by Bloom to 'coincidence' rather than 'intuition'). 'What suggested scene was then reconstructed by Bloom?' the inquisitorial or catechistical narrator asks:

> The Queen's hotel, Ennis, County Clare where Rudolph Bloom (Rudolf Virag) died on the evening of the 27 June 1886, at some hour unstated, in consequence of an overdose of monkshood (aconite) selfadministered in the form of a neuralgic liniment, composed of 2 parts of aconite liniment to 1 of chloroform liniment (purchased by him at 10.20 A.M. on the morning of 27 June 1886 at the medical hall of Francis Dennehy, 17 Church street, Ennis) after having, though not in consequence of having, purchased at 3.15 P M. on the afternoon of 27 June 1886 a new boater straw hat, extra smart (after having, though not in consequence of having, purchased at the hour and in the place aforesaid, the toxin aforesaid), at the general drapery store of James Cullen, 4 Main street, Ennis. (*U* 637)[77]

The excessive and excessively scientific, quasi-judicial details provided in the paragraph are characteristic of the idiolect in this episode. At this point, however, the phrasing suggests that Bloom is avoiding the emotional power of his memory of Rudolph's suicide. The details are curiously and unnecessarily repetitive, allusive, roundabout, muddled even, confused. In particular, the timing of the events on the day of the suicide is obsessively particularized. Rudolph takes three actions on 27 June:

(1) 10.20 A.M.: buys poison
(2) 3.15 P.M.: buys a new hat
(3) after 3.15 P.M.: takes an overdose and dies

But the paragraph reverses and – partly through its parentheses – confuses the order of things while at the same time insistently raising (by denying it) the question of causality. There is in fact a sense in which the two principles of narrative order, temporality and causality, break down at this point. The order in which the events are *presented* is as follows:

(3) after 3.15 P.M.: takes an overdose and dies
(1) 10.20 A.M.: buys poison
(2) 3.15 P.M.: buys a new hat
(1) 10.20 A.M.: buys poison

What emerges most clearly, perhaps, is the futility of any attempt to account for Rudolph's suicide by detailing his actions on the day in question, the futility of any attempt to explain or rationalize that act in either temporal or causal terms. The paragraph raises the fundamental question of why the suicide occurs – the question of what kind of logic can explicate

such a finally inexplicable act and the question of how such an act can be presented at all. If causality is questioned in this paragraph, so too is logic, reason itself; what could be more unreasonable than to purchase a new hat, especially an 'extra smart' new hat, on the day on which you are going to kill yourself? The smart new hat signifies hope, the future, life, to the extent that since he bought a hat one can imagine that Rudolph did not intend to kill himself at all: clutching at straws, perhaps, one might imagine that purchasing the materials for his suicide did not lead inevitably, ineluctably to suicide.[78] At this point, the text itself introduces an element of doubt over the question of Rudolph's suicide: why buy a smart new hat, it seems to ask, if you are about to kill yourself? More generally, it asks how the events preceding a suicide can be accounted for and how causality operates on such a day. And it raises the overarching question of the kind of rationality that is at work in an act that ends all possibility of reason, an act that brings us up against the foundation of reason itself.

Understandably, perhaps, Bloom does not tell Stephen about his father's suicide. In fact, although others mention the suicide, and despite the fact that it is so often on his mind, Bloom does not speak of it to anyone. Here, indeed, Bloom's silence on the matter is explicitly noted:

> Did he depict the scene verbally for his guest to see?
>
> He preferred to see another's face and listen to another's words by which potential narration was realised and kinetic temperament relieved. (*U* 637)

Rather than talking about what is on his mind – what has been on and off his mind all day – Bloom prefers to listen to Stephen, which allows for a form of release from his own difficult, troubling thoughts of parental suicide.

One of Bloom's final acts on 16 June 1904 again brings him up against the unavoidable fact of his father's death. After Stephen leaves in the early hours of the morning, Bloom looks into a locked drawer. The drawer contains various documents, including those pertaining to his father (there is a notice of his change of name and a photograph of him with *his* father from 1852). Most significantly, there is an envelope addressed '*To My Dear Son Leopold*', words that evoke fractured memories of the original letter's contents:

> Tomorrow will be a week that I received . . . it is no use Leopold to be . . . with your dear mother . . . that is not more to stand . . . to her . . . all for me is out . . . be kind to Athos, Leopold . . . my dear son . . . always . . . of me . . . *das Herz* . . . *Gott* . . . *dein*. (*U* 676)

The fragmenting of the memory of the letter is perhaps a response to the unbearably moving contents: its declaration of affection for wife and son, its plea to care for the dog, the letter's German heart (*das Herz*) and appeal to God, its confession that Rudolph is at the end of his tether, and its declaration of *Liebestod*, its sense of an unbearable mourning for a dead wife, its sense of a love that finally kills. These fragments of the letter in turn evoke thoughts of 'a human subject suffering from progressive melancholia':

> An old man widower, unkempt hair, in bed, with head covered, sighing: an infirm old dog, Athos: aconite, resorted to by increasing doses of grains and scruples as a palliative of recrudescent neuralgia: the face in death of a septuagenarian suicide by poison. (ibid.)

Once again, and finally, as Bloom's day ends, there is mention of the poison that kills his father and again the suggestion that the drug might also be a cure, a palliative – that the poison, like suicide itself, might be considered a pharmakon, a medicine that cures because (in this case) it kills.

John Stanislaus Joyce: A 'broken hearted' Father

While nothing in *Ulysses* can be taken to be simply or solely autobiographical, while myth, history, religion, class, politics, economics, literature, and other discourses, traditions, and practices all direct and determine the text, the fact that Joyce strives consistently, indeed obsessively, throughout his career to work into his writing the materials of his personal life might prompt us to ask whether the suicide of Bloom's father may be said to respond to or even to reproduce, in some form, something of Joyce's own father, John Stanislaus. As it happens, there is evidence to suggest that for several years in the first decade of the twentieth century, John Joyce was considered, by himself and by his son, a potential suicide.[79] This sense of John Joyce's latent suicidality is expressed most starkly and most explicitly in Joyce's so-called *Trieste Notebook*. The notebook contains a series of comments, mainly on individuals, written between 1907 and 1909, many of which made their way into *Portrait* and *Ulysses*. It contains a total of twenty short remarks on 'Pappie', Joyce's father, the first of which is brief and unequivocal. Referring to his father, Joyce writes, 'He is an Irish suicide'.[80] The striking sentence is both unequivocal and deeply ambiguous. It is possible to read 'Irish suicide' as implying that the suicide is not a *serious* suicide (with the adjective 'Irish' being used in a conventionally derogatory way), as involving a threat or performance of suicide that is not carried through. But 'Irish suicide' might also indicate a special kind of suicide:

we might speculate that the phrase points to a suicide that is *achieved* in a specific kind of way. John's 'suicide', we might surmise, is characteristic of a certain type, one that identifies or constitutes a certain convention of Irish masculinity. As Stanislaus Joyce and others have recorded, John Joyce had a particularly destructive/self-destructive personality, a drive towards death characterized by heavy drinking and generally disturbed, dissolute habits – in other words, one that might be conceived as an expression or condition of a stereotyped mode of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Irish masculinity.[81] But however the phrase 'Irish suicide' is construed, its implication is beyond doubt: Joyce's first and fundamental sense of his father is that he is a (potential) suicide. This is a remarkable and troubling assertion, and one that must be regarded as having serious consequences for Joyce's consistently autobiographical and para-autobiographical writing.[82]

The Trieste note in fact seems to coincide with a number of letters that Joyce received from his father that give strong and disturbing indications of a theatrically suicidal personality. In a strikingly emotive letter from 24 April 1907, John laments his son's elopement with Nora three years earlier and sentimentally represents himself as near death. The letter offers notable parallels with Leopold Bloom's various ruminations on *his* suicidal father in *Ulysses*. Responding to a now-lost letter from Joyce, John declares that he will not 'reproach' his son (since 'I feel certain your own inmost soul and heart . . . must do that'), before proceeding to catalogue his filial failings (*Letters* 2.221). The main point of John's letter seems to be to induce in his son a sense of pre-posthumous guilt: twenty-four years before his actual death from natural causes in 1931, John announces his own imminent demise, thereby attempting to stir in Joyce a sense of shame and remorse. He self-pityingly complains that he has been left alone to 'eke out the few remaining years of misery and loneliness, until God will take pity on my wretchedness and end my unhappy life', before implying that it may not in fact be a question of years and that the letter can be interpreted as a suicide note:

> My excuse for writing this is that it is possibly the last communication you will ever receive from me, for as matters stand at present here a big change is about to take place and I wish to put *you* in possession of all the facts. (*Letters* 2.221)

John explains his dire financial position and details his efforts to get his remaining dependent children off his hands. He faces imminent eviction and plans to live alone in lodgings after getting 'the little ones fixed first' (*Letters* 2.222). He laments the fact that none of his children have shown

him 'respect' or affection' and, in a comment that chimes with Rudolph Bloom's suicide note, characterizes his life since his wife died in August 1903 as a 'miserable existence' (ibid.). He says that he might return to Cork, a claim that, as John Wyse Jackson and Peter Costello remark, is used 'almost [as] a maudlin euphemism for death'.[83] John speaks of the 'few, very few I sincerely hope, years I have yet to live' and speculates that 'long after my release from this world, you may learn to feel some of the pangs I have endured' (*Letters* 222–3); and he represents himself as a self-sacrificing father who has done his best to nurture his children but has been scorned for his efforts, 'despised, disrespected, jeered at, scoffed at and set at defiance' (*Letters* 2:223). He ends the letter by repeating, in even more emphatic terms, his ambiguously suicidal threat that this 'may be my last letter to you': 'Goodbye, Jim, and may God protect you, is the prayer of your still fond and loving, though broken hearted, Father' (*Letters* 2.223).

The letter is, in effect then, a suicide note – albeit one that records an event of suicide that never takes place (itself a not uncommon rhetorical mode, of course). Such rhetoric is remarkable, but it is also remarkably consistent in John's letters over a long period of time. John Joyce's 'broken heartedness' reappears in the next surviving (published) letter to his son, dated 16 May 1909, where he claims that his misery is caused by a 'wretched heartless world' and where he makes it even more plain that he is, in his own eyes, a would-be suicide:

> I fear the end is coming in more respects than one, as my health is fast breaking up and I feel certain I have seen my last Xmas. I would welcome death *tonight* most joyfully if I were to consult my selfish feelings, as a grateful relief from a miserable existence, but the thought of leaving my little motherless girls *friendless*, cast upon the wretched heartless world, without *one* relative to give them a meal if hungry, or shelter for the night, [means that] I am forced for their sakes to try and live and work. (*Letters* 2.228–9).

John Joyce *would* commit suicide, in other words, if it was not for his concern for his daughters. Two years later, after the death of his seventeen-year-old daughter Mabel in June 1911, John writes again in this vein to James, lamenting not only the death of his daughter but also of his wife, 'Maime', who has 'left me to linger on, a broken hearted old man' ('but only for a very short time . . . I am now most anxious to die', he writes). Once again, he signs off with the old refrain of broken-heartedness and imminent demise: 'for the short balance of my life think of me as your fond, though heartbroken Father', he writes (*Letters* 2.290–1).[84]

For several years, in other words, Joyce lived with the possibility of his father's suicide, with his father's repeated threats that he would end his own life. The phrase 'broken hearted' is used prominently in these letters as John signs himself off, as if from life itself, and it is picked up by Joyce and put to work in *Ulysses* in the context of the suicide of Bloom's father. As we have seen, one of the most extended considerations of suicide in Joyce's work occurs in the 'Hades' episode, the episode that takes as its bodily *motif* the heart and that is almost encyclopaedic in its discourse on that organ. In 'Hades' Bloom asks why earlier societies found it necessary to impale the heart of a suicide with a stake, 'as if', as he puts it, 'it wasn't broken already' (*U* 93). Literally to be 'broken hearted', this suggests, is to be dead. Why put a stake through a suicide's heart? runs the logic, since a suicide's heart is, by definition, figuratively 'broken'. In this playful but also mournful deliberation on suicide, Joyce seems to be riffing on his father's suicide phrase. John's insistence that he is 'broken hearted', that he has little time left before his death, his mourning for his wife, his assertion that these are his 'last communication[s]' with James, his euthanastic sense of the relief of death – all feature in Rudolph's literally haunting presence in *Ulysses*. One way to conceive of Rudolph is as a literalization of the implied or implicit threats of suicide that Joyce received from his father over a number of years. In terms of his suicide, at least, Rudolph is an actualization of Joyce's father's suicidality. While suicide does not end with the biographical presence of Joyce's father and his suicidal discourse (and cannot be said to begin there either), the fact that Bloom's father displays many of John's characteristics suggests that the novel is itself haunted by Joyce's 'suicidal' father. Like John and like James himself, Bloom is not a suicide, even if he often thinks, with pleasure, of release, of death. But the suicide of his father may be said to infect and affect his every day, including the everyday day, 4 June 1904: his world and his life are dominated and determined by this death, just as Joyce's life, after his mother's death, continues in the shadow of a suicide father, a suicidal father who never committed suicide, a heart-broken man who repeatedly writes suicidal messages, if not actual suicide notes, to his son from Dublin.

An Everyday Temptation

It is the episodicity of suicide in *Ulysses* and in Joyce's other works that allows the act to be pervasive and to be overlooked, to be hidden in plain sight – hidden because of its 'simplicity and familiarity'.[85] And we might

understand this to constitute a key characteristic of modernism more generally: working at a tangent to or by the side of or indeed paradoxically *against* narrativity, quotidian modernist episodicity is both unmistakeable and that which goes (virtually) unnoticed. The repetitive individual, allusive, fragmentary, and momentary instances of suicide and suicide ideation in Joyce's writing collectively add up to something more than the sum of their parts but not to a coherent narrative. Joyce holds in tension the eventhood of tragedy, of aesthetic or despairing or love-suicide, on the one hand, and the episodic quotidian suicidality of the everyday, on the other. The latter fleeting, fragmentary, hardly noticed un-momentous moments collectively offer a sense of suicide as a pervasive, permanent, everyday temptation for the living and a pervasive, permanent, everyday regret or object of mourning for the suicide survivor. As we have seen, suicide – the ordinary, everyday thought of suicide – is permanently on Bloom's mind in *Ulysses* because of his father's death. It is crucial to Bloom's sense of self as a suicide survivor and, via its identificatory aspect, as a potential suicide. One reason for this might be that paternal suicide was permanently on Joyce's mind. Like Bloom, Joyce had his own father permanently if episodically in his thoughts and, like Bloom, even in his voice (in a letter written a few months after his father's death in 1931, Joyce comments that his father's voice has 'somehow got into my body or throat. Lately, more than ever – especially when I sigh', he says; *Letters* 3:250).[86] In this sense suicide, paternal suicide, is in the end the fundamental but finally inadmissible, un-narratable *topos* not only of *Ulysses* but also more generally of Joyce's remarkable body of work, its tragic and quotidian theme. Love-death, suicide for love, the love that kills, is a pervasive trope in Joyce's work and is articulated as tragic high-art enactment of a young man's aesthetic ambition. But it is also, and increasingly as time goes by, configured as the ordinary, episodic, everyday eventhood of a certain way of being, of being a father, but also of being-in-relation to that father as a son.

CHAPTER 5

'death death death lovely death'
Stevie Smith, Sylvia Plath, and the Idea of Suicide

> 'Remember: though these words are some relief,
> the breath I draw to fill them gives a pain
> beyond your knowledge'.
>
> (Don Paterson, 'The Forest of Suicides')

The contemporary Scottish poet Don Paterson prefaces his version of part of Dante's *Inferno*, Canto 13, 'The Forest of the Suicides', with a two-line epigraph from Sylvia Plath's 'Winter Trees'. In doing so, he implicitly draws a parallel between Dante's thirteenth-century Florence and Plath's twentieth-century Devon, while at the same time translating the historical into the domestic and the male into the female: rather than Pier delle Vigne, erstwhile loyal chancellor to the Holy Roman emperor Frederick II, who claims that he 'held both the keys to the heart of / Frederick' and who killed himself after being imprisoned and brutally tortured for disloyalty and theft, the suicide whom Paterson's speaker encounters in the forest is a woman who once 'held both keys / that fitted my *father's* heart' (emphasis added).[1] Just as Sylvia Plath's 'The Applicant' concerns a potential husband who is being interviewed for the job, and just as the speaker in 'Daddy' selects a 'man in black' as a substitute for her dead father,[2] so in Plathian rhyme the speaker in Paterson's poem interviews for her father's 'successor': 'None of them would do / until a black shape cut the light in two // and at once I knew my ideal candidate'. But part of the power of Paterson's poem, its insight both into Plath's writing and into suicidality more generally, involves the way that it sums up the *question* of suicide ideation, the cognitive habit or tendency and, in this case, the speech act that allows some 'relief' while at the same time giving 'pain / beyond your knowledge'.[3]

Building on Paterson's evocative phrasing, this chapter examines in more detail the question of suicide ideation and its expression in twentieth-century poetry, focusing on the relief it affords and the pain beyond knowledge that it can bring. It considers Sylvia Plath, a poet who has become

almost synonymous with suicide, alongside Stevie Smith, a poet whose work is remembered, above all perhaps, for the delight it takes in the very prospect of 'death death death lovely death'[4] – and not least for a single poem that engages, in a way that is both decisive and undecidable, with the suicide trope of death by drowning.

A series of questions that literary suicidology asks have to do with the *point* of suicide narratives. Why do they get written? What are they *for*? And why do we read them? What are the cultural, social, and therefore also psychological functions of representations of suicide in literature? The persistence of such literary representations, in all periods but increasingly from the late nineteenth century onwards, seems itself to necessitate such questions. While there can be no simple or straightforward answers and while there may indeed be a certain naivety in asking these questions, we can say that it is within the space of literature that they can be explored most dispassionately and yet intimately. Literary suicide narratives can themselves be conceived of as forms of suicide ideation but only in so far as we can talk about 'ideation' as having to do with language: in other words, we are not talking only about ideas, concepts, or themes but also about words, about narrative and poetic form, and about such 'literary' elements as tone, perspective, sound effects, genre, figures, and tropes – about everything that goes under the umbrella term 'rhetoric' (so we might more accurately talk about 'suicide rhetoric', 'suicide narration', 'suicide discourse', or 'suicide poetics'). In particular, I examine in this chapter what happens in, with, and through literary texts that talk about suicide by looking specifically at two writers who figure suicide ideation or suicide discourse as a vital supplement to the act itself. Reading Stevie Smith alongside Sylvia Plath allows us to examine various dimensions of the twentieth-century literary culture of suicide – including suicide ideation and expression, aspects of the death drive and death wish, suicide and personal identity, suicide talk as therapeutic, attempted suicide as a 'cry for help', the nature of the suicide note, the production and dispersal of meaning in suicide writing, and the question of suicide and gender.[5] But reading these two poets will in particular allow us to gauge, in relation to suicide ideation, the distinction between relief and pain beyond all knowledge – and to consider the way that such relief and such pain constitute the limits of literature's encounter with the thought of killing oneself.

Sylvia Plath on Stevie Smith

The relationship between Stevie Smith and Sylvia Plath has been often noted but little explored. Both in their writing and in their lives, the two

overlapped in significant ways, and Plath seems to have been inspired and in some ways deeply influenced by the older poet. In February 1962, Plath contributed a poem, 'In Plaster', to *The London Magazine*, together with a response to six questions posed to twenty-six poets, including Robert Graves, Stephen Spender, Philip Larkin, Derek Walcott, Elizabeth Jennings, and Plath's husband, Ted Hughes. In answer to the question 'What living poets continue to influence you, English or American?' Plath singled out and quoted Stevie Smith. 'The poets I delight in', she comments, 'are possessed by their poems as by the rhythms of their own breathing':

> Their finest poems seem born all-of-a-piece, not put together by hand: certain poems in Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, for instance, Theodore Roethke's greenhouse poems; some of Elizabeth Bishop and a very great deal of Stevie Smith. ('Art is wild as a cat and quite separate from civilization.')[6]

The work of each of the poets that Plath names can be seen to bear on her own in significant ways. Plath had audited the 'mad and very nice' Robert Lowell's Writing Poetry course at Boston University in the spring of 1959.[7] In the eponymous fourth section of his 1959 collection *Life Studies*, Lowell had recently made what Plath later described as an 'intense breakthrough' to the kind of emotionally, psychologically, and rhetorically raw accounts of personal and family life that are also at work in many of her own poems.[8] Roethke is the poet that Plath 'admire[s] next to Robert Lowell' ('I find he is my influence', she writes her mother in February 1961; *LH* 407) – and her 'breakthrough' poem, 'Poem for a Birthday', had to be edited so as not to appear to plagiarize Roethke's 'The Lost Son'.[9] Roethke's 'greenhouse poems' from *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1948) articulate a hallucinatorily vivid and monstrously anthropomorphic vision of plants that indirectly reflect on the poet's troubled relationship with his father, the authoritarian German American Otto (the farmer and greenhouse owner who died when Theodore was only fourteen), just as Plath's 'Bee' poems from *Ariel* indirectly address the question of her relationship with her father, another authoritarian German American named Otto, the entomologist and author of *Bumblebees and their Ways* (1934) who died when she was eight.[10] And Plath admired the 'lesbian & fanciful & jeweled' Elizabeth Bishop, whose 'fine originality' is 'always surprising, never rigid, flowing', as she comments in her journal in February 1958 and October 1959 (*J* 322, 516). In *Poems: North and South – A Cold Spring* (1955), Bishop may be said to have offered Plath a model of pellucid reticence in natural observation that can also be seen in some of the more quietly contemplative moments from her own poetry.

In spite of these evident lines of influence, however, the way in which Plath singles out Stevie Smith is striking. The other three poets are each given distinctly qualified approval: 'certain poems' in Lowell's collection are commended (the 'Life Studies' section contains fifteen poems); there are just fourteen poems in the 'greenhouse' sequence in Roethke's *The Lost Son*; and only 'some of' the forty-eight poems in the two collections published in Bishop's 1955 volume are prized. By contrast, Plath affirms her unqualified delight in 'a very great deal' of Smith's work and even quotes a line from 'The New Age' (included in *Not Waving but Drowning*; 1957). Her comments in *The London Magazine* were followed by a personal letter to the older poet dated 19 November, five days after Plath composed the final poem that she planned to include in *Ariel* ('Death & Co') and on the day that she wrote the post-*Ariel* apocalyptico-Holocaust poem 'Mary's Song' (with its final claim that 'the world will kill and eat'; *CP* 257). Although the letter is frequently cited, critics have paid surprisingly little attention to Smith's influence on Plath. And yet the latter's identification with the English poet is intriguing.[11] In November 1962, Smith's *Selected Poems* had just been published, and Plath explains in her letter that she has been listening to some British Council recordings of Smith reading her poems: 'I am an addict of your poetry', she says, 'a desperate Smith-addict', before going on to ask where she can get hold of a copy of *Novel on Yellow Paper*, commenting that she is 'jealous' of the title of a novel that, as she must somehow have intuited, bears a striking resemblance in terms of narrative form and subject matter to her own recently completed and soon-to-be-published autobiographical novel. Saying that she hopes to meet Smith when she moves back to London in the new year, Plath invites the older poet to coffee 'to cheer me on a bit' (possibly wanting the older poet thereby to cheer her *up* as well).[12] Smith's response was understandably guarded, noting that she had not had the chance to read Plath's poetry, and no more seems to have come of the relationship before Plath's death three months later.[13]

And yet the two poets shared a particular fascination with and were drawn towards the idea of death.[14] Given the frequent references to suicide ideation in Stevie Smith's poetry and her denomination of the act as an 'art' in one of her most explicit suicide poems, 'Death Came to Me' (1937; *CPD* 46), we can surmise that, for Plath, a key attraction of Smith's writing may have been just this prominence of death in her work ('that great prince that must come at the end', as Smith calls it in *Novel on Yellow Paper*; 1936) and indeed of suicide ideation – the idea, the thought, the temptation to suicide.[15] At least two critics have noted the suicide link between the two writers, while also fending it off, if not dismissing it exactly. Diane Mehta

comments in passing on the poets' shared interest in the act, and proposes that Stevie Smith's 'obsession with death and suicide' should be understood as 'less a totally encompassing, Plath-like despair than . . . a yearning to explore death'.[16] Linda Anderson, in turn, has commented on Smith's 'preoccupation with death', on the 'pervasiveness of the death drive' in her poetry, and on the power of the thought of death to 'offer a way out of life's suffering if necessary', arguing that talking about death is a way to ask questions about 'the limits of signification' while also 'bringing her own uncanny presence back into the text'; like Mehta, Anderson has commented on the similarities between Smith and Plath and on their 'tantalisingly brief conjunction' in 1962, while also, like Mehta, emphasizing their 'national and generational differences' and 'contrasting . . . styles and personae'.[17]

The parallels between Smith's poetry and that of Plath go deeper than this, however, and are indeed strikingly mirrored even in aspects of their otherwise very different lives. Both, as it happens, attempted suicide in 1953 (Smith at the age of fifty, Plath at twenty). And both attempts were undoubtedly linked to traumatic events when – again, coincidentally – they were both eight years old: it was when she was eight that Plath's father died, and it was also at age eight that, having effectively lost her father when he 'ran away to sea' five years earlier, Smith suffered a nervous breakdown and discovered the potentially redemptive power of imagining her own death.[18] What the two writers *made* of these events is interesting and illuminatingly different. For Smith, it led to a lifelong conception of death as solace, to the thought of death as redemptive, consoling, even encouraging. For Plath, pain seems to have been transformed into rage, and suicide is articulated as a weapon – not only against others, of course (against a father or a mother or a husband, for instance), but also, as Plath herself understood, against herself.

'Our patterns will be broken all up': Stevie Smith

Stevie Smith's breakdown when she was eight is recorded in detail and with stark autobiographical clarity in a lengthy passage in *Novel on Yellow Paper*: 'it is a wise thing that every intelligent, sensitive child should early be accustomed to the thought of death by suicide', the first-person narrator, Pompey Casmilus, comments. Pompey records being sent away, as Smith was, to a 'convalescent home' and remembers thinking that if she cried for long enough she would die. On discovering that however long she cried she remained stubbornly alive, Smith's evidently autobiographical protagonist

makes an important discovery: while one might not *die* from crying, simply the *thought* that one might – and that at some point one inevitably would – can itself be 'very consoling and very comforting'.[19] 'Always the buoyant, ethereal and noble thought is in my mind', she comments stoically, on realizing that 'Death is my servant'. Pompey emphasizes the personal and the political dimensions of this epiphany:

> So I think every sensitive young child should early learn this. It is a great source of strength and comfort. It is so possible that things may become more than we can bear, is it not? That is not my thought at all. But rather, it is so possible we may be afraid that things will become more than we can bear. There is a very deadly poison in the fear that things may become more than we can bear. There is a very deadly sort of slave feeling in this thought. For if we think this and become undone by our fear, we may too anxiously placate our fellow-beings, who appear to us to be in more authoritative positions and to have more of power than we over the things that oppress us. But with death our immediate ally, such thoughts vanish.[20]

As her biographer Frances Spalding comments, for the rest of her life Smith 'retained this richly anarchic realization that death lay within her control', and this nostalgia inspired some of her 'best' poems.[21] Because of her understanding that she could take her own life at any time, and just because of the availability of death, Smith concluded that there was therefore no need to kill herself at any particular moment: death could wait. 'The thought [of suicide] cheered me up wonderfully and quite saved my life', she later commented in an interview. 'For if one can remove oneself at any time from the world, why particularly now?'[22] 'What pulls one up from these terrible depressions', she told the novelist Kay Dick, is 'the thought that it's in your own hands, that you can if you want to, make an end of it'. And yet, as she goes on to say, 'one never does' make an end of it[23] – which is confirmed by the fact that she *is* alive and that for most of the time she even considers herself to be happy. 'Why are so many of my poems about death, if I am having such an enjoyable time all the time?' Smith asks in a late essay, 'What Poems Are Made Of' (1969; *MA* 128). As she comments to Kay Dick, she *loves* life, *adores* it, but only on condition that she can keep herself 'well on the edge'.[24] Possibly echoing the closing advice from Philip Larkin's most famous poem to 'Get out as early as you can',[25] Smith claims that she 'wouldn't commit myself to anything' because she can 'always get out if I want to'. 'I think this is a terribly cowardly attitude to life', she goes on: 'I'm very ashamed of it, but there it is, dear. I love death, I think it's the most exciting thing'.[26]

The paradox around which Smith's writing perpetually circles is that not committing oneself to anything also allows one to not commit to committing suicide. It is a fine balance, and the theme or idea not just of death, of being dead, but also of bringing about one's own death in the time and manner of one's own choosing – this sovereign saving power – is at work in many of Smith's poems and strikingly so in the novels, all three of which revolve, to a greater or lesser extent, around suicidality. 'I do really think death will be absolutely marvellous', she says in a 1969 interview. 'I don't think we could possibly enjoy life without death . . . If there wasn't death, I think you couldn't go on'. Death isn't a 'calamity', she says, but is 'the greatest blessing'.[27] 'I'm nuts on death really', she had written to the Irish playwright Denis Johnston in 1937, before commenting laconically that it 'comes out in my poems' and 'does something to limit their ready sales' (*MA* 263).

What Jessica Walsh has called Smith's 'romance with death' is pervasively at work in her poetry.[28] 'In a great many of my poems there is the idea of death as a friend', Smith remarks at the start of a poetry reading in Edinburgh in August 1965, before reading 'Not Waving but Drowning'.[29] Thus in an early poem, 'The River Deben' (1937), death is anthropomorphized, as it so often is, as a friend or at least as a friendly face: 'His face is shrouded but he smiles I see': 'Smile pleasant Death', the speaker pleads, 'smile Death in darkness blessed' (*CPD* 44–5). In a late poem, 'Black March' (1972), there is a figure whose name almost rhymes with death ('His name is a breath // Of fresh air') and whose face is also hidden but who is also a 'friend' (*CPD* 653–4), while in the five-line poem 'Mabel', the lonely woman finds the 'hiss of the unlit gas / Companionable' (she dies 'sublime', like a chemical body that has gone directly and painlessly from a solid state to something more ethereal) (*CPD* 723).[30] In 'When I Awake' (1938), death is described as a 'Deceitful friend', but only because the promise of his coming is delayed and because sleep constitutes death's misleading simulacrum (misleading or deceptive not least because, tragically, we usually wake from sleep; *CPD* 676). In 'Why do I . . . ' (1966), Smith asks 'Why do I think of Death as a friend?' and offers a straightforward answer, ending the nine-line poem, via an allusion to Emily Dickinson's 'After great pain, a formal feeling comes –', in an apostrophe to a godlike, friendly death who 'scatters the human frame / The nerviness and the great pain' (*CPD* 587). If suicide constitutes a 'punishment' for a 'turning inwards' of thoughts and if the thought of it brings 'self-hatred and remorse', as Smith caustically opines in the early poem 'Analysand' (1937; *CPD* 51), in 'Why do I . . . ' it is also 'sweet' because it is a scatterer of the coherent self and is, *as such*, a source of redemption,

hope, even of love. To be scattered, like ashes, is to be saved. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that in 'Tender Only to One' (1938) the lover to whom the speaker is loyally devoted is finally identified as 'Death' (*CPD* 99).

As she does in her most famous poem, Smith regularly figures death as a form of drowning, a way of dying popularly held to be the most gentle, the most user-friendly, most euthanistic, least violent method (what Plath refers to as 'the kindest way to die' in *The Bell Jar*).[31] In 'The River Deben', for example, death by drowning is 'sweet':

> All the waters of the river Deben
> Go over my head to the last wave even
> Such a death were sweet to seven times seven.
> (*CPD* 44)

Death is sweet not to the extent of the biblical seventy times seven – the number of times, according to Christ, that Peter should forgive his brother (Matthew 18.22) – but to the more practical and measured seven times seven: hinting at it, the querulously restless Christian Stevie Smith plays on biblical numerology. In this sense, death is both sublime – it is 'night's companion' and has 'exultation' and 'ecstasy' in its 'breath' – and domesticated, homely, parochial (as is perhaps indicated by the poem's geographical location, an obscure Suffolk river and the village of Waldringfield). And yet the poem that follows this one in *A Good Time Was Had by All* (1937) is one of Smith's most explicit suicide poems, and here suicide is more violent: in 'Death Came to Me' (1937), death asks the speaker which method she will choose, offering 'a knife / A labelled flask a gun'. Having considered the knife and the poison, she picks up the heavy gun and shoots herself: 'I put it to my head / And now I'm dead', the poem ends, as it both has to and logically cannot (*CPD* 46–7).

Sometimes, Smith's suicide poems are playfully reasonable, even philosophical. 'The Reason' (1937) is a poem of two tritely acerbic end-stopped disyllabic iambic quatrains followed by an epilogue-like couplet that refuses to scan:

> My life is vile
> I hate it so
> I'll wait a while
> And then I'll go.
> Why wait at all?
> Hope springs alive,
> Good may befall

> I yet may thrive.
> It is because I can't make up my mind
> If God is good, impotent or unkind.
> (*CPD* 49)

The prosodic breakdown of verse seems to undo the neatly superficial logic of the first eight lines, as if the ultimate religious question concerning the nature of God undoes any hold on reason itself. Indeed, just as it hesitates over its ambiguously end-stopped first line, the rhyming couplet clinchingly reverses the logic of the two quatrains, swerving the poem away from the question of why the speaker does not immediately kill herself to the predicament in which she cannot decide whether to kill herself or not: 'It' in 'It is because' refers not to the fact that she fails to kill herself but to the limbo-like condition in which she both hates her life and waits for the possibility of some 'Good'. At the same time, the poem subtly answers the sealed logic of the great master of rhyming couplets, Alexander Pope, when it echoes the phrase, 'Hope springs eternal', from Epistle III of the *Essay on Man*. 'Hope humbly then', Pope advises, 'with trembling pinions soar':

> Wait the great teacher death, and God adore!
> What future bliss, he gives not thee to know,
> But gives that hope to be thy blessing now.
> Hope springs eternal in the human breast:
> Man never is, but always to be blest:
> The soul, uneasy and confined from home,
> Rests and expatiates in a life to come.[32]

Pope's lines assure the reader of a benevolent anthropomorphized God who will guarantee the blessedness of a future state. He assures us that humans never *are* but always *will be* blessed: we can expect to be blessed in and by 'a life to come' but not in this one. For the individual who sees life itself as 'vile', such an assertion might be a reason to commit suicide. Smith has what William May terms an 'allusive voice', and here she forcefully plays 'alive' off against Pope's 'eternal'.[33] Answering Pope's famous line in 'The Reason', Smith asserts the theological unknown (which Pope also refers to in 'he gives not thee to know'), an epistemological limit that is emphasized in the double 'may' ('may befall', 'may thrive'), as it is in the couplet's closing assertion of doubt. Like Hamlet – surely the other key literary figure haunting 'The Reason' – the speaker ends up not killing herself but waiting for death to come because she does not know what awaits her in 'The undiscovered country from whose bourn', as she and Hamlet are assuredly aware, 'No traveller returns' (*Hamlet* 3.i.78–9).

One of the notable ways in which Stevie Smith talks about death, in fact, is just in terms of waiting for it (or, more often, for 'Him') to come – in terms of death's delay. In 'When One' (1963) – an earlier, longer version of 'Why do I . . . ' (1966) – for example, death is required *without* delay: when couples torment each other (Smith's standard conception of coupledom), death 'as he must come happily, / Should not delay' (*CPD* 688). Even after the protagonist of Smith's morbid, ballad-like colonial poem 'A Shooting Incident' (1950), has finally shot himself, he laments the length of the delay that preceded the act: 'Why has my hand this hour postponed / That sees me now with dust conjoined?' Colonel Yeast asks in his final words (*CPD* 280). The only question to ask as he dies is why he hasn't acted earlier. Like Colonel Yeast, we might surmise, Smith considered herself a 'long-delayèd suicide' (*CPD* 277), since death's delay was a lifelong concern – not least because, paradoxically, it is only in or through its deferral that death's delay *can* be lamented and poems written. But death's delay is also paradoxical with regard to the question of *why* there should be such delay. When the means of self-annihilation are so close to hand and the urge or motive so strong, Smith asks, why should one wait? 'Why dost thou dally Death, and tarry on the way?' she demands with forced poetic or biblical formality in 'Come, Death (I)' (1938): 'Come, Death, and carry now my soul away', she pleads – come *now* (*CPD* 115). But we might also notice an equivocation in the first plea. The absence of a comma between 'dally' and 'Death' allows for the possibility that it is not Death so much as 'thou' – you, but also therefore me, since that is what 'you' seems to mean here, as it so often does in poetry – that is delaying death: the line might be asking, why do you (why do I) delay death, why does it dally or I dally it? – in a hesitation over death's agency, which might indeed be mine. Despite my plea for immediate death, in other words, there is something that holds me back. And this is inevitable, necessary, inasmuch as no delay means there can be no talk, no talk of death. In 'My Heart Goes Out' (1957), Smith again points to the paradox or hesitation of agency in the assertion of our unconscious desire for death: death is what 'All living creatures' want, the poem asserts, even though 'When they are living they do not think so' (which begs the question of what 'they' – animals and human animals alike – may be said to think when they are not living or whether indeed they can do so at all) (*CPD* 422). But even in 'Come, Death (II)' (1972) – probably the final poem that Smith wrote, and a poem that she recited more than once from her deathbed and that was read out at her funeral[34] – she is still waiting, forty years after 'Come Death (I)', for death to 'come'. 'Come, Death, and carry me away', she writes, pleadingly repeating the words of her earlier poem; 'Come Death. Do not be slow', she commands

impatiently (*CPD* 658). The first poem, in which the speaker is neither ill nor evidently at the end of her life, is not just about waiting but is also about being proactive in forcing Death's arrival: 'When I have summoned thee with prayers and tears, why dost thou stay?' she asks (*CPD* 115). On one reading, death's delay allows for and at the same time enforces writing, makes poetry happen. But we might also think of poetry, of writing, as putting death off, staying it, making it stay away. Suicide ideation – in the form here of suicide discourse or inscription, of poetry – works as a substitute or supplement for death. In *writing* about putting death off, Smith *puts* death off – which, after all, is all that we can ever hope to do. If a definition of living is the delaying of death, poetry might be defined as a way of temporarily ensuring, or at least registering, that delay – poetry as the ultimate form of temporizing, poetry as prevarication.

It is often therefore the act of waiting for death, often death's delay, that Smith celebrates in her poems. 'Study to Deserve Death' (1942) figures humans as soldiers who, if they bravely fight the battle of life, will 'deserve' the death that will finally come: 'not for pride / I say Endure, but that such end denied / Makes welcomer yet the death that's to be died' (*CPD* 207). The faint echo of one of Smith's favourite poems – 'The end descried', from stanza three of Robert Browning's 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came' – is perhaps not coincidental: Browning's poem, like Smith's, is also about delay, deferral, and uncertain, ambivalent endings.[35] In 'God and Man' (1950), the human urge to end life means that God is forced to counsel 'Man' against suicide: 'Oh Man, do not come to me until I call', he urges. It is 'Man' that is God's very life in this theology, his 'all' and 'of all my animals the dearest'. And yet it is man that, since he 'weariest first' and seeks to 'come' to God before his time, must be denied this resolution, whose suicide must be interdicted (*CPD* 298).

The calming, restorative effect of suicide ideation – of thinking, writing, talking about suicide, expressing one's wish to end one's life – is explicitly addressed in Smith's 'The Bottle of Aspirins' (1957), a five-line bilingual poem in which the bottle that contains the pharmacological elixir of death – the 'end and remedy' as 'My Heart Goes Out' (*CPD* 422) has it – itself acts as a metonymical sign of the possibility of escape:

> 'I look at the bottle, when mournful I feel'.
> 'C'est une ressource contre tout', ajouta-t-il,
> (Avec le sombre gaité du pays des suicides
> D'où il était), – 'two hundred and I am freed',
> He said, 'from anxiety'. (*CPD* 221)

The country of suicides is a state of mind, a mythical circle of Dante's purgatory, perhaps – as well as being France, we are led to surmise. It is not clear who says 'ajouta-t-il', who makes the comment in parentheses, or who says 'He said'; nor is it clear why 'he' and the speaker/narrator of the poem both use English and French. But what *is* clear, I think, is the sense of a certain doubling – of the 'I' and the one that says 'he', of the one whose speech is quoted in the first line and the one whose speech is quoted in the second. As in 'Suicide's Epitaph' (1938), where a four-line English poem is followed by a three-line answer in French (*CPD* 172), 'The Bottle of Aspirins' suggests that suicide is always double and in that sense always from another country – from the country of suicides, from France – as well as from Smith's own country, from England. And this national linguistic division is also of course internal. The suicide herself is split, divided, talking in a language that is not her own and with which she may not be able to identify. The language that the suicide speaks is also other to her, familiar enough but not her own.

And it is possible, in fact, that this suicidal doubling might provide some kind of a key to the way in which suicide ideation, or expression, works for Smith. In a conversation recorded in 1963, she explains to Jonathan Williams that she is afraid of novels because, while a poem allows one to 'turn the emotions and feelings onto someone else, onto different characters' and to 'invent stories', no such 'turning' can be effected in a novel. 'You'd think you could do that in a novel', she comments. 'Other people can, and have. *But I can't*'.[36] In other words, it is by displacing thoughts of suicide onto another, onto someone else, that the poems can articulate them. Novels, paradoxically and somewhat unexpectedly, are too personal, expressive, unmediated – and perhaps in a sense too heavy, too dark, too monolithic.

It is this disinterest or impersonality, perhaps, that allows Smith's poems to tell us again and again that you would be better off dead – or, if you wouldn't be, anyway that she, the poet, would be. In 'Le Revenant' (1958), another poem that employs the French language to speak of death, the speaker imagines her uncle's ghost returning to a 'habitation' at 'the centre of the nation' to tell people that 'It is much better to be dead'. But the living do not want to hear this and 'stoned him from the door' so that he vows rhymingly that 'he would come back no more' (*CPD* 306). Another visitant from the dead appears in 'Mr Over' (1946), in which his tombstone announces that the dead eponymous Over has departed life for 'You' ('Over to You', the inscription says). 'You' is implicitly a paranomastic Yaweh, the God whom we do not know even while we know He is 'our friend and our

brother / Our father and such', and, 'much more' than that, the one 'We all of us long for so much'. The voice in the speaker's heart tells her to 'Follow / Where he has led' while the 'devil's voice' declares 'Happy / Happy the dead' (*CPD* 299).

As this might suggest, Stevie Smith's poetry constantly circles around Freud's notion of the 'death drive' (a little like a shark, one might say), and we might think about the way that such a 'drive' both drives and conditions her poems. Smith wonders aloud to Kay Dick why the young are drawn to her generally rather 'melancholy' poems since the poems are, she says (managing slyly, or perhaps unconsciously, just to avoid Freud's phrasing), 'a bit deathwards in their wish'.[37] Declaring in her 1969 essay 'What Poems Are Made Of' that she 'loves' death, she goes on to explain that death 'breaks the human pattern' and 'frees us' from the world (*MA* 129). One of Smith's most important statements about the death drive comes in her wonderfully evocative, surprisingly uplifting late poem, 'The Donkey' (1972) – a poem that is precisely about being broken down, or broken up, at the end of one's life. The donkey of the title has a 'gleam' in its eye that tells us that it is not the 'hedged track' that lies before it now, but the 'sweet prairies of anarchy'. The last stanza of the poem stretches the four lines of the first four verses to six and begins by repeating its key phrase. What lies ahead are –

> the sweet prairies of anarchy
> And the thought that keeps my heart up
> That at last, in Death's odder anarchy,
> Our patterns will be broken all up.
> Though precious we are momentarily, donkey,
> I aspire to be broken up. (*CPD* 616)

The pronominal movement of the last stanza is elusive, complex and, in various ways, moving – from 'me' to 'we' (including the donkey and speaker as well as you and I) to 'you' (the donkey), back finally to 'I', which also identifies with the 'you'/'it' of the donkey ('it' being not only the poem's first word but also one that is used seven times in the first four stanzas). The speaker wishes to be an 'it' and aspires, thereby, to be 'broken all up', to be 'broken up' – almost as if the phrase needs repeating, or breaking. The stanza may be said to account for much that is at work in Smith's poetry more generally – including the very oddness, whimsy, or idiosyncrasy of her writing; its sometimes anarchic resistance to the ordering of syntax, lexis, and especially of what we might call poetic decorum; its challenge to poetry's syntactical, rhythmical, rhyming pattern. In this sense, it was not

just modesty (or even false modesty) that made Smith write to Rowland Watson in November 1960, when she was preparing her *Selected Poems* for Longmans, that she 'rather doubt[s]' that she is a poet because she doubts that what she writes are poems: 'I know they're *something*, but is it poems??' she asks.[38] It is the poems themselves that ultimately aspire to a kind of anarchic and even unpoetic disorder that Smith identifies with death and that is quite possibly linked here with the disordering of entropy (itself something of a contemporary 'buzzword' in the 1960s).[39] Smith's poetry might be contrasted with the highly deliberated, control-freakish undoing of language that we encounter in the modernism of a Joyce or Beckett, in whose exacting work (and despite the fundamental differences between the two) every word may be said to know its place. In Smith, the apparent poetic nonchalance of the writing – its prairie-like refusal to be defined, its failure to distinguish between the profound and the flippant, between the considered and the casual (or between the 'casual and the cunning' in Stephen James's illuminating account),[40] or to settle on a stable tone and regular poetic form, its metrical and rhyming (ir)regularity, its play with and on one's expectations for 'light verse', its resistance to the serious and indeed partly thereby its implicit opposition to scholarly or formal interpretation – this apparent formal and tonal insouciance and disorder seem to involve a version of the entropic undoing that Smith associates with death itself.[41] What have donkeys, and what has the very English, self-contained, small-scale, urban and suburban, while also urbane Stevie Smith to do with prairies – those vast grassy flatlands that we associate with Colorado, North Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Montana, Oklahoma, or Wyoming, say, or with the immense and seemingly unbounded steppes of Central Asia? The very geographical dislocation is itself an aspect of the disorder, the undoing that is ceaselessly and very precisely at work in Smith's poetry. But it is important to recognize that it is just the thought of this odd anarchy of death, this undoing that 'keeps' the speaker's 'heart up'. To go on, for Smith, one must be able to think that one need not go on, that one might be broken all up: it is just this thought that can keep your heart up – just the thought that you will in the end be undone, unpatterned, disordered, that you will be free to roam like a retired donkey in the sweetly anarchic prairies of uncontained nonbeing.

It is the idea that one 'might have to go on' that also dominates another notable late poem (in this case an intensely self-lacerating one) that is also about having to go on and yet longing not to. In Smith's 'cunningly plotted' poem 'Thoughts about the Person from Porlock' (the opening poem in the 1962 *Selected Poems*),[42] Smith interprets Coleridge's account of the

composition of 'Kubla Khan' (which famously claims that the poem's oneiric emergence was interrupted by a man from the North Somerset village of Porlock) as a characteristically Coleridgean justification for being 'already stuck' with his poem – stuck with it in the sense of not being able to get away from it but also in the sense of not being able to go on with it. But for Smith the 'Person from Porlock' is itself another figure of death – for which she 'longs': she sees him as a 'friend' for whom she waits impatiently (*CPD* 446). That the Person from Porlock is more than just a person calling in on the poet from a nearby village becomes increasingly apparent as the poem develops – with its insistence that the Person should come and with its increasingly metaphysical and explicitly religious phraseology:

> I am hungry to be interrupted
> For ever and ever amen
> Oh Person from Porlock come quickly
> And bring my thoughts to an end.
> (*CPD* 446)

At this point, the poem about how a poem gets, or fails to get, written seems to turn ineluctably into quite another poem, one in which the speaker calls on God/Death to 'come', and to 'come quickly'. The interruption that the speaker longs for would be not just a temporary cessation of thinking, but rather a permanent interruption of life, an interruption 'For ever and ever amen' – as both the speaker and the Lord's Prayer put it. And again there is a paradox, for if the thought of the Person from Porlock arriving is what may be said to sustain the speaker, it is also thought itself, all thought, that needs to be stopped. What is wanted is something that will 'bring . . . thoughts to an end'. There is a sense in which the next verse anticipates one of the great suicide narratives in the canon of modern European cinema, Michael Haneke's *The Seventh Continent* (1989), in which the three members of a family systematically destroy all of their possessions before killing themselves. In the case of Smith's poem, however, it is the Person from Porlock who is imagined as breaking things up and thereby setting people free:

> I felicitate the people who have a Person from Porlock
> To break up everything and throw it away
> Because then there will be nothing to keep them
> And they need not stay. (*CPD* 446)

The slightly unusual 'felicitate' means 'celebrate' or, in its Latin form, (wish) good luck or felicity.[43] 'I celebrate people who are interrupted', the line

declares, 'I declare them lucky, wish them luck'. And yet the grammatical construction – 'I felicitate them *to* break everything' – suggests that the word might or should mean something like 'encourage' or 'facilitate', and it is at this point that the poem starts to hesitate over the question of its own ethical status – over the morality involved in *encouraging* suicide, a final and permanent interruption, in others. And this is how the poem ends, in a moral quandary or quagmire that is reflected in an un- or awkwardly rhythmical almost-prose stanza that is also un- or awkwardly rhymed as well as syntactically askew:

> These thoughts are depressing I know. They are depressing,
> I wish I was more cheerful, it is more pleasant,
> Also it is a duty, we should smile as well as submitting
> To the purpose of One Above who is experimenting
> With various mixtures of human character which goes best,
> All is interesting for him it is exciting, but not for us.
> There I go again. Smile, smile and get some work to do
> Then you will be practically unconscious without positively having to go.
> (*CPD* 447)

The casualness of these lines and their faltering syntax, rhythm, rhetoric, and rhyme seem to reflect the 'almost unconscious' state of almost not-thinking to which they appeal and that will allow one not to 'go'. At the same time, the concerted resistance to rhythm, syntax, and (full) rhyme in the lines denotes a kind of poetic collapse that seems to follow from an ethical objection to suicide ideation. There is a sense, in other words, that it is suicide ideation, the poetic consideration of this darkest of thoughts, that ultimately allows poetry to happen at all. If death will end writing, the thought of it provokes poetry, impels it, drives it, inspires it.

Thus Smith's insistence on the therapeutic value of the contemplation of death in general and of suicide ideation in particular is not always consistent and not unconflicted or uncontested. In fact, part of the point of suicide ideation (and expression) in Smith is just that it *is* necessarily conflicted, paradoxical, uneasy, or disquieting.[44] Her unpublished poem 'Death' is one of Smith's most extended poetic considerations of the question (although all three of her novels may be said to constitute narratological meditations on the efficacy of the discourse of the death drive and of suicide).[45] 'There's a great many things I'd rather not be than dead', the poem opens in a grammatically awkward almost-idiom that plays on the cliché 'I'd rather be dead', but twists it round to focus on death (*CPD* 722). The speaker does not quite say *what* she would rather not

be – paralyzed? demented? on Death Row? in chronic pain, unbearable agony, or unrelieved suffering? an executive PA for a magazine publisher? married? unmarried? a man? a woman? French? – because the point is not so much that she would prefer to be dead than be those other things, whatever they are, but that death itself is, for the speaker, in many ways a comparatively attractive state. 'And this is the thought that runs for ever in my head', the poem continues. But the thought is ambiguously both the thought that there are things that the speaker would rather not be than dead and what then ensues, which is a debate about the value of thinking about death, as the poem turns in on itself, encloses itself recursively in the thought. What the poem suggests is that death is 'the end of life' – the end as ambiguously its aim, as Schopenhauer and Freud would both have it. Death is 'the end of strife, / A rope, a poisoned cup, a knife' (in a list that identifies death with suicide).[46] Death is 'all this', the speaker says –

> . . . and so all this should only be
> An end, and at the end, not bear thee company,
> Ever at hand and fobbed with an insurance policy
> Keep Death where he would be, in his own place,
> He has a dusky half familiar face
> And waits to do you a last act of grace.
> Last, last and ultimate,
> Not the thought-fellow of your living state,
> Not to be had in mind but only at the end to wait.
> (*CPD* 722–3)

It is a direct and seemingly unambiguous argument against suicide ideation, against keeping the thought of death as a 'thought-fellow', as if the thought of death is familiar enough anyway, without there being any need to nurture the friendship or fellowship any further. And while questions of levity, of tone, of sincerity, and of authorial intention are ceaselessly at work in multiple and finally undecidable ways in Stevie Smith's writing, it is possible to read this straight, take it at face value: there is a value in keeping death, the thought of which we perforce live with, at arm's length – a value in keeping it for the end, when it will anyway come, whether we have thought about it before or not. And yet there is still at least a double paradoxicality about such an assertion: on the one hand, a poem about not thinking about death thinks about death in order not to think about it. And on the other (related) hand, there is a performative double bind involved in the fact that the speaker demands that we reserve the thought of death for the end of life, but that she nevertheless makes this demand by talking and thinking about death and by making us think about death thereby – so that we can only obey her, in other words, by disobeying her, by attending

to her thoughts about death. Thoughts about death are double-edged (like an axe or a sword) – which is itself a thought that, like that of death and of suicide, is never far away in Stevie Smith's poetry.

It would surely be inconceivable to conclude a discussion of the poetics of death and suicide ideation in Stevie Smith without saying something about the poem that came quite quickly to 'personify her reputation', 'Not Waving but Drowning'.[47] Smith's 'signature' poem is undoubtedly about death and arguably about death by suicide, but it also goes to the heart of a more general problem in the relationship between literature and suicide ideation because it is about communication, or about metacommunication. In fact, of course, the poem is about *mis*communication, about what Will May calls a 'fatal misunderstanding' – about some people misreading the signs that another person is making.[48] But the problem is more fundamental than this because the poem ultimately involves a fatal misunderstanding about whether or not the person is making signs at all.

'Not Waving but Drowning' was first published in *The Observer* in August 1954. Smith subsequently reprinted it in 'Too Tired for Words', an essay aimed at doctors and published in *Medical World* in December 1956.[49] Introducing the poem to general practitioners (GPs), she explained to them that she often tried to 'pull [herself] together' (as a GP or psychiatrist in the 1950s might advise someone who has dark thoughts or who is prone to writing poems about loneliness, depression, and suicide):[50]

> But it's a tightrope business, this pulling oneself together, and can give rise to misunderstandings which may prove fatal, as in this poem I wrote about a poor fellow who got drowned. His friends thought he was waving to them but really he was asking for help. (*MA* 113)

Smith implies that the poem is about a man whose friends misread the signs that he is sending them and, thinking that he is just 'larking' about, tell him to 'pull himself together', after which he pulls himself apart, kills himself.[51] Pulling oneself together is a 'tightrope business', in other words, and telling someone to do so can be fatally misguided. And yet, as Smith surely knows, this is not really what the poem is about at all, since no one in the poem is told, or tries, to pull himself together. Quite the opposite, in fact: the drowning man's gestures are misinterpreted as waving or happily larking. No one tells him to pull himself together because no one is aware that he might need to. Dropping the phrase about pulling oneself together, Smith later used otherwise almost identical wording to introduce the poem in a reading for the BBC that was broadcast in October 1963 ('A poor man has just got drowned. His friends thought he was waving to them from the sea but really he was calling for help').[52] In another

reading for the BBC, from August 1965, she makes a small but important change to her wording: rather than 'asking' or 'calling' for help, she says that the man was 'drowning' – 'really he was drowning'.[53] The alteration is critical and might alert us to the fact that the poem can be read in two fundamentally different ways: as a poem about a man drowning but not meaning to (really he is calling for help) and as a poem about a man drowning intentionally or not, but anyway not necessarily calling for help (really he is drowning). The poem can be about an accident or it can be about suicide. Saying that the man was 'really . . . calling for help' limits the ambiguity, confines the poem's meanings, since it suggests that he did not mean to drown. 'Really he was drowning', by contrast, restores the richness and complexity of the poem's underlying ambiguity (he may or may not want to drown). In both cases, the poem can be read as hinting at suicide ideation, as being about someone talking about suicide, expressing his intention to kill himself. If a man talks to you about his suicidal thoughts, you can take him seriously or not; you can see him as 'larking' or as drowning; you can see him as waving, trying to communicate with you, or as not wanting to communicate but only appearing to do so. And *poems* about suicide and about suicide ideation are, if anything, even more difficult to 'read'. Poems often lark about, of course, and in particular they lark about with and in language; but they can also be deadly serious. Indeed, poems are particularly complicated in relation to communication since what we might call their 'poeticalness' or 'poeticity' involves precisely the way that they *both* communicate and resist communication. That is what makes them poems rather than, say, suicide notes or cries for help. In fact, Smith's most popular poem is deceptively straightforward – and popular presumably in part, at least, just because it looks so simple – while also being deeply ambiguous and strangely resistant to interpretation:

> Nobody heard him, the dead man,
> But still he lay moaning:
> I was much further out than you thought
> And not waving but drowning.
>
> Poor chap, he always loved larking
> And now he's dead
> It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,
> They said.
>
> Oh, no no no, it was too cold always
> (Still the dead one lay moaning)
> I was much too far out all my life
> And not waving but drowning. (*CPD* 347)

If Smith's poem is *about* miscommunication – in its emphasis on the man's hand gestures being misinterpreted and his words going unheard – it is also a poem that itself resists, risks, interferes with, or interrupts communication. The poem disrupts our understanding, for example, by figuring the man as both dead and not dead. It raises the question of how, if he is dead, the man can continue to moan, and to hear and speak. In its initial newspaper publication in *The Observer* in 1954 (and subsequently in the 1957 collection and in Smith's 1962 *Selected Poems*), the poem had no speech marks, a fact that complicates and obscures the identity of the poem's speakers and its narrator.[54] And then it is also unclear what we are to make of the seemingly definitive assertion that 'it was too cold always': if it was too cold for him to live, why did it take the man a lifetime to die? Even in the man's moaning, in fact, the poem seems to equivocate over whether there is meaning or not in the sense that moaning can be an inarticulate noise as well as a verbal complaint.

Most troublingly, however, there is the opposition of waving to drowning that the poem's title asserts and that is repeated in two of its twelve lines, which leads inexorably to the critical question of the relationship between the two acts. In this context, we might ask what a drowning man does with his hands. Is it called 'waving'? If it is, then why is there an *opposition* between waving and drowning? We can surely see that the hands of a drowning man might be waving in the sense of moving his hands as 'a sign of greeting or farewell' (*OED*, wave, v, I.9a) or as making a sign 'by a wave of the hand' (*OED* v, I.10.c) to indicate, in this case, that he is in need of help. You can wave *and* drown at the same time, in other words: the actions are by no means mutually exclusive. But the opposition indicates that, despite what others seem to think, the movements of the man's hands and arms may not be *signs* at all; that they are, rather, a drowning man's meaningless or *non*communicative floundering, oceanic death throes (waving in the sense of moving 'to and fro or up and down' like, or indeed with, the unmeaning waves; *OED*, wave, v.I). The misunderstanding is not about the meaning of the gesture but about whether it can be said to mean at all. In this respect, the poem seems to raise the prospect of an undecidable relation between sign and nonsign – which might itself be seen as a way of talking about the question of poeticity, about the site or space or locus of the poetic. Smith's poem, in other words, can itself be read as opening up the question of poetry (it is *something*, as Smith would say, but is it a poem?; what *is* a poem?). 'Not Waving but Drowning' is not only about a man drowning but is also about poetry, about a woman writing poetry. The question to ask in both cases is not whether or not we are interpreting the signs correctly – it is not a question of what is *meant* by

the movements of the man's hands or the words on the page – but, more fundamentally, of whether these are acts of communication at all. As it happens, the picture – that visual supplement – that eventually (although not at first) accompanied the published poem is of no help in resolving these questions, but instead raises others: it seems to depict a *girl*, and one who is only waist-deep in water and whose arms hang down in a way that can in no sense be described as 'waving' except inasmuch as they are resting in the waves ('waving' in that paronomastic sense).[55] In the same way, in a sense, the man's explanation that he was not waving but drowning (his oral supplement to manual (non-)signs) seem to obscure rather than to clarify the movements of his arms and hands. Do these movements contain or involve meaning? Are they really signs at all? *Is* the man trying to communicate, or are these the panicky reflex movements of someone drowning? Is the poet trying to say something to the reader, or is she just larking with words, or drowning in them? On one interpretation – one that has rarely been broached by critics but should perhaps be acknowledged – Stevie Smith would be just like the drowning man: she would be someone who is interpreted as attempting to communicate while in fact she is only flailing in a sea of words as she drowns. Or she is like the *dead* man, who despite being dead tries to say something but is either not heard or is misunderstood. In the end, we might say, the poem has to do with the ways in which language breaks down, about how communication stops when it comes up against a speaker's own self-determined death, when it comes to thinking, ideating, talking, and writing poems about suicide.

'I maunch on chagrins':[56] Sylvia Plath

If it would be inconceivable to write about suicide ideation in Stevie Smith without talking about 'Not Waving but Drowning', it would surely be more generally inconceivable to write a book on representations of suicide in twentieth-century literature without talking about Sylvia Plath, the century's 'most haunting . . . literary suicide', as Jeffrey Berman puts it.[57] Part of a trend in mid-twentieth-century American writing that includes most prominently the suicidal poets John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, and Anne Sexton, Plath and suicide have become more or less synonymous, and suicide is heavily overdetermined in her reception. Those works that are almost universally acknowledged to be Plath's most important – the collection of poems that, before her death, she gathered together under the title *Ariel*, and the autobiographical novel that appeared just months before

her death in the United Kingdom and then two years later in the United States – have since their publication been read almost exclusively in the biographical context of her death.[58] 'For most people, as Clare Emily Clifford comments, Plath's works 'represent the epitome of suicidal poetry'.[59] There is almost no critic who talks about Plath without talking about suicide – her own suicide or her poems and novel about suicide and suicide attempts, but usually both together – even when they talk about the fact that we shouldn't talk about suicide (or shouldn't talk so much about it or only about it) when we talk about her writing.[60] Indeed, to talk about Sylvia Plath and not talk about suicide – its ideation, her writing about it, and the act itself – would be to produce a deafening silence indeed, a 'Great silence of another order' ('Little Fugue', 1962; *CP* 188).

In his foreword to the American edition of *Ariel* (1966), Robert Lowell memorably and somewhat melodramatically describes Plath's poems as 'playing Russian roulette with six cartridges in the cylinder, a game of "chicken", the wheels of both cars locked and unable to swerve'.[61] Lowell's mixed-up metaphors conflate writing suicide with enacting, performing, or completing it. As Christina Britzolakis comments in relation to Lowell's assertion, it is 'almost as if the poems are writing Plath's suicidal destiny *for* her; she does not merely express herself but *becomes* herself'.[62] Al Alvarez is possibly the most eloquent and influential spokesman for this reading of Plath, as the critic who establishes, early on and permanently, the link between the *Ariel* poems and suicide – Plath's impresario, who presents her as 'engender[ing] a literary movement' that is 'constituted in the very image of her death'.[63] In a series of essays that lead up to *The Savage God*, his broadly sweeping book about the inspiring and energizing force of suicidality for a certain kind of twentieth-century writer, Alvarez firmly links Plath's writing causally with her death. He argues that Plath's late poems 'systematically explor[ed] the nexus of anger, guilt, rejection, love and destructiveness which made her finally take her own life': the road she followed, Alvarez argues, in a phrasing that blurs the distinction between depression and writing, was 'one-way, and she went too far along it to be able, in the end, to turn back'. Plath's suicide itself 'proves nothing' about her poetry, Alvarez claims: it was 'simply a risk she took in handling such volatile material'.[64] In other words, the suicide tells us nothing about the poetry – except the crucial fact that the poetry *caused* Plath's death. 'The achievement of her final style', Alvarez asserts in a BBC Radio programme broadcast on 23 September 1963, 'is to make poetry and death inseparable'.[65] Thus, even while he famously opines that she did not intend to kill herself earlier that year,[66] Alvarez argues for a teleological

and supremely *meaningful* account of Plath's suicide. The danger of such a reading becomes clear in a 1966 'Postscript' to the original broadcast, in which Alvarez compares Plath's death with that of John Keats. Overlooking the awkward medical fact that Keats died from tuberculosis, he puts an idiosyncratic spin on the Byronic claim in Canto 11 of *Don Juan* that the young poet was 'snuff'd out by an article'. As Alvarez not unreasonably argues, Keats's 'great creative outburst was triggered off by nursing his brother Tom through his final illness'. But he then goes on to make the clinically nonsensical claim that the poet 'pushed death so much to the foreground of his consciousness that it became unavoidable; having written the poems there was nothing left for him to do except die'.[67] For both Keats and Plath, by this reading, death is a direct result of writing, as well as its end or aim. As Britzolakis argues, according to such an interpretation, Plath's 'madness and suicide' become 'the *telos* and ultimate meaning' of her career.[68] In fact, however, this is a particular, and contentious *construction* of a career, even if it has had the crucial authority of Ted Hughes's ordering of *Ariel* to support it. As Hughes himself explains in his introduction to Plath's *Collected Poems*, while Plath planned to end the volume with 'Wintering' and the word 'spring' (with its intimations of rebirth and survival), his own ordering securely implies a teleology of suicide by ending the volume with poems that draw the reader's attention ineluctably to Plath's despair and self-inflicted death.[69]

In fact, Plath's reputation for suicidality began almost immediately. In a letter to Elizabeth Bishop from October 1963, Robert Lowell is privately even more 'extremist' (in Alvarez's phrasing) about this than he is in his foreword to the American edition of *Ariel*: asking Bishop if she has read the ten 'terrifying and stunning' poems by Plath posthumously published earlier that month in *Encounter*, he comments accurately enough that they have 'touches of me' as well as 'touches of your quiet and humor'. But they are 'searingly extreme poems', he remarks, and although 'whatever wrecked [Plath's] life somehow gave an edge, freedom and even control, to her poetry', he 'almost wishe[s]' that they had 'never come about'. 'You probably know the story of her suicide', Lowell comments. 'The poems are all about it'.[70] But Lowell exaggerates. Only half of the ten poems published in *Encounter* ('Death & Co', 'Getting There', 'Lady Lazarus', 'Little Fugue', and 'Daddy') may even be said to intimate or imply suicidality (and then, with the exception of 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Daddy', only at a certain interpretative stretch). The other five poems in the selection seem to have quite different concerns: 'The Swarm' figures a swarm of bees as a Napoleonic army (the poem is 'suicidal' only inasmuch as soldiers who fight to the

death or bees that die for the good of the colony can be described as suicidal); 'The Other' is about the self as other to the self; 'Childless Woman' is about or is spoken by a childless woman who is not evidently suicidal; 'The Jailer' is about a dysfunctional and/or sadomasochistic but suicide-free relationship (both sadism and masochism may be said to be the opposite of suicide, in fact, since in both cases, what seems to be desired is an intensity of experience rather than its end); and 'Thalidomide' describes the grotesquely distorted bodies of the victims of the drug that the title names. Each of these poems is about speakers, personae, or characters that, even while they are in 'extreme' situations, can only with difficulty be described as suicidal.

But Lowell's is not an uncommon exaggeration, and as critics have noted, this version of Plath's work has become part of a poetic mythology. Sylvia Plath writes primarily about death and mostly about the death that would end her own life, it is said; she was 'suicidally obsessed';[71] the 'drive to self-destruction . . . tyrannize[s] the last poems'.[72] As Susan Bassnett remarks, 'readers who study her work as a series of prefigurations of suicide will find plenty of references to death, many to suicidal death'.[73] Perhaps the most direct example of such assessments comes in a 1976 essay co-authored by the British psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas and the American literary critic Murray Schwartz. 'We assume that in her writing Plath projects her own psychic and somatic states', Schwartz and Bollas declare, as well as 'her self images, and a representation of her world of self-other relations'. In her *Ariel* poems, they argue, Plath created 'a world in which she could no longer find the possibility of survival'.[74] For Schwartz and Bollas, writing is a supplement to or substitute for action, specifically the action of killing oneself. And they argue, in fact, that Plath invents 'compulsive, ritualized suicide attempts as an effort to avoid an absence at the center of her being'. But 'when her inner world could no longer be ritualized in print', they go on, 'she acted out the ritual'.[75] As such readings suggest, more than for any other American or British writer, the reception of Plath's work has been fixated on the interpretative act of reading back into it the act that ended her life – even while critics regularly militate against such a conflation of text and life.[76] The critical reception of Plath is in some ways obsessed with this question, traumatized by it, unable to escape or to move on from the critically divisive, finally unassimilable event of her suicide.

But what exactly is the value of suicide in Plath's writing? How does it work; what is its rhetorical force and effect? How should it be understood? Such questions inevitably lead back to the problem of the troubled relationship between writing and life, which is already addressed by Plath

herself – continually, quizzically, and often astutely – in the journals as well as in her poetry and fiction. In February 1956, for example, she comments that what she calls the 'dialogue between my Writing and my Life' is a perpetual site of undecidability, 'always in danger of becoming a slithering shifting of responsibility, of evasive rationalizing'. As Plath recognizes, she is able to justify the 'mess' she has 'made of life' by saying that she will 'give it order, form, beauty' by 'writing about it', while at the same time she can justify her writing 'by saying it would be published', thereby giving her 'life' as well as giving 'prestige to life' (*J* 208–9). Writing in her journal on the related matters of her mother and her own 1953 suicide attempt after speaking with her analyst in December 1958, Plath comments that writing 'was a substitute for myself' as well as 'a way of ordering and reordering the chaos of experience' (*J* 448).[77] There is no way of disentangling the life from the writing, in other words, not least because her writing takes much of its power from the temptation that it offers us to read into it, or to read it alongside, an authorial life: the two are intertwined, intimately at work in a symbiotic formation in which one emerges out of and reflects on the other.[78]

Plath's extraordinarily frank, often personally and interpersonally lacerating, affectively frenetic, psychologically self-eviscerating journals give unique insights into her thinking from 1950 to 1959 (along with a few passages that survive from journals written in later years, but have otherwise been lost or destroyed). It is striking, however, that contrary to popular myth and the perception of Plath as defined by the act, her comments on suicide are only sporadic and, more often than not, refer to the deaths of other people (fictional or real), to her earlier suicide attempts, or in fact to her current *dis*inclination towards killing herself. 'I don't want to die', she declares baldly at the age of eighteen in August 1950, for example (*J* 10). Although eight years later, in June 1958, she comments that she has 'violence in me that is hot as death-blood' and that 'I can kill myself or – I know it now – even kill another' (*J* 395), just a month earlier she had responded to her suspicion that Hughes (the 'liar and . . . vain smiler, a twister'; *J* 387) was having an affair with a student by telling herself that she *won't* commit suicide, writing that she is 'disabused of all faith, and see[s] too clearly'. 'No, I won't jump out of a window or drive Warren's car into a tree, or fill the garage at home with carbon monoxide & save expense, or slit my wrists & lie in the bath', she comments, listing some of the methods that she had already contemplated or tried (*J* 391). In July 1957, Plath made one of several comparisons between herself and Woolf, commenting that 'Virginia Woolf helps' and that her novels 'make mine possible' (*J* 289), even while

in February she had contrasted herself with the novelist precisely in terms of her own attempted and Woolf's completed suicide: 'I feel my life linked to her, somehow', Plath remarks; 'I love her', she goes on, before commenting that she feels she has been 'reduplicating' Woolf's suicide in her 'little scandal', as she calls it in a letter to her mother (*LH* 129) of 'that black summer of 1953' (*J* 269). 'Only I couldn't drown', she explains to herself in a comment that prefigures the failed suicidality of Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*: 'I suppose I'll always be over-vulnerable, slightly paranoid. But I'm also so damn healthy & resilient. And apple-pie happy. Only I've got to write', she remarks (*J* 269).[79]

In a journal entry from March 1956, Plath refers to a class discussion at Cambridge University in which the tutor, Miss Burton, 'checked us when we impulsively said suicide was an escape (on defensive?) and she said it was a brave thing – if one could only live corruptly and miserably in this world, – to leave it'. Plath's comment – 'NB So we thought. Once' (*J* 225) – is telling and seems to indicate that she sees herself as having passed the stage of youthful idealism when making compromises in life seems like an existential failure and the leaving of it therefore an act of courage. In fact, while failure for Plath is always traumatic, the idea of suicide tends to be *more* so. Rather than being comforting or tempting, the idea is more often quite the opposite, causing her dread and a certain anxiety, since death is itself the mark of a certain failure, of the underachievement that she so much fears. 'When I am blue', she remarks in April 1958, 'I think about death, about having to die having lived awake to so little of the world' (*J* 374). A few months later, she asks herself what exactly she is afraid of when she lies awake at night or when the 'panic bird' visits (*J* 418; see also 423). 'Chiefly', she responds, it is 'Life without having lived' (*J* 421).[80] 'Don't let indolence, the forerunner of death, take over', she urges herself a year later in another journal entry (*J* 502). Indolence, failure, nonachievement are to be feared precisely because they are a version of or substitute for death. Death is not an escape from failure, but its ultimate expression. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that in May 1952 Plath coined the term 'death unwish', in a comment that refers (via Andrew Marvell's seducer, T. S. Eliot's wasted land, and Christopher Marlowe's Faustus) to conventional images of the flight of time, to 'the winged chariot, the horns and motors, the Devil in the clock' (*J* 184):[81] what is to be feared is not life, but time running out, death.

There are, of course, moments when Plath's interest in suicide is marked. Her fullest account of her own suicide attempt in August 1953 appears in the notes that she made on her therapy sessions with Ruth Beuscher in

late 1958 and 1959. In April 1959, she recalls that she 'concentrated' on her suicide, agreeing with Beuscher that it was 'a knot in which much is caught' (*J* 478) and then noting a few weeks later that the attempt constitutes what she calls a 'pressure point' (*J* 481).[82] In the records of these sessions, Plath notes various observations about the attempted suicide, the most striking of which concern her mother: she tried to kill herself because she was unable to kill her mother ('I'd kill her, so I killed myself'; *J* 433); Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' is an 'almost exact description of my feelings and reasons for suicide', which are summed up as 'a transferred murderous impulse from my mother onto myself (*J* 447); and her attempt was a '"shame" to her, an accusation' (*J* 448). In Plath's classically psychoanalytic account of herself, suicide is figured as internalized aggression towards, and a shaming or accusation of, other people and directed specifically, unrelentingly at her mother. And such rationalizations feature prominently, as we shall see, in the poetry that Plath wrote in the years that followed.[83]

Plath's interest in suicide and suicidality is also indicated in a more trivial, more quotidian, less personal way when she registers the suicides of others, even (or especially) suicides by people known to her only indirectly. In August 1951, for example, she records the suicide of the father of a fellow student at Smith College (*J* 94), and in the following month, while in the college infirmary, she writes of the suicide of the brother of a nurse's boyfriend (*J* 536). More than a decade later, in January 1962, she notes the suicide of the brother-in-law of her friend and neighbour (*J* 632–3), while in January 1958, she refers with interest to the suicide of the French artist Nicolas de Stael three years earlier (*J* 317).[84] In March 1958 Plath thinks about her own future children and about the genes they will inherit, noting ominously that Ted Hughes's family is 'full of madness – suicide, idiots' (*J* 359); in 'The Manor Garden', written the following year and presented as the first poem in *The Colossus* (1960), Plath refers to her belief that the baby that she is carrying will inherit 'white heather, a bee's wing, // Two suicides, the family wolves, / Hours of blankness' (*CP* 125). Plath also makes one or two references to suicides in literary narratives, commenting after reading *Macbeth* in February 1956 that she has a tendency to 'pick up poetic identities of characters who commit suicide, adultery, or get murdered' and that she believes 'completely in them for a while': 'What they say is True', she comments, worryingly (*J* 204). In April 1958, she notes that *McCalls* (the 'magazine of togetherness', she notes amusedly) is running a series of stories on difficult social problems including 'suicide from boredom, despair, or embarrassment' (*J* 361). In October 1959, she comments on Mavis Gallant's recently published novel, *Green Water, Green Sky* (1959). The novel

concerns 'a daughter-mother relation, the daughter committing suicide', and Plath considers writing a novel on similar themes. She says that she wants to write a 'brazen' and even 'arrogant' novel, but is concerned that in writing about 'a character who is not myself' she might not be able to avoid producing 'a stereotype, mournful, narcissistic' (*J* 518–19).

Given Plath's reputation, however, it is notable that aside from the ten months or so leading up to her suicide attempt in August 1953, references in her journal to the possibility of or intention to kill herself are rare. There is a somewhat flippant and inconsequential comment in an undated journal entry from 1950, for example, when Plath makes a self-cancelling comment that without any past or future, which is 'all that the present is made of', one might as well do away with oneself (*J* 30). And there are, more seriously, a number of comments after the spring of 1956 that relate, rather ominously, to her conviction that she could not survive without her husband, Ted Hughes. In March 1957, for example, she says that her 'whole being' has 'grown and interwound so completely' with Hughes's that if she were to lose him, 'I do not see how I could live. I would either go mad, or kill myself': 'I cannot conceive of life without him', she declares (*J* 274). Plath also makes a number of references to her own suicidality in terms of a version of the Freudian 'death drive': in March 1951, she asserts that she 'desire[s] the things which will destroy me in the end', seeming to mean both sexual desire and artistic ambition (*J* 55); in a 'Letter to a demon', of October 1957, she refers to her 'murderous self' and to the 'black cloud which would annihilate my whole being with its demand for perfection and measure' (*J* 618, 620); and in April 1959 she comments that all of the poems that she wrote while at Smith (in 1957–8) are 'miserable death-wishes' (*J* 477).

Plath's suicide attempt in August 1953 is repeatedly used as source material for her fiction – not least, of course, in *The Bell Jar*, where it features prominently (the novel was originally titled 'The Diary of a Suicide'),[85] and in 'Tongues of Stone', her 1955 short-story dry run for the novel. In January 1958, she lists her suicide attempt as one of the things she 'knows' and can try to 'master' in writing (*J* 307). In July 1957, she sketches an outline of a story titled 'The Day of the Twenty-Four Cakes', which describes a married woman with children who loses her 'sense of order in [the] universe, all meaningless, loss of hopes', who 'waver[s]' between 'running away or committing suicide', but who is 'stayed by need to create an order' and 'slowly, methodically begins to bake cakes', one per hour for twenty-four hours (*J* 288). In June 1959, Plath 'discovers' that the suicidal 'heroine' of *Falcon Yard*, her unfinished and now lost novel, is a young sadomasochistic woman

appropriately named Sadie Peregrine –'SP, my initials . . . And Sadie: sadistic', Plath remarks (*J* 498; see also 443). And in June 1959, inspired by articles on mental health in *Cosmopolitan*, Plath plans an article, a story, and even a novel on 'a college girl suicide' (*J* 495).[86]

But it is only for a relatively brief period leading up to her suicide attempt in August 1953 that the journals give evidence of Plath seriously contemplating killing herself. In November 1952, she makes some vivid comments on the corporeality of her experience of depression: if she has ever 'come close to wanting to commit suicide', she remarks, 'it is now, with the groggy sleepless blood dragging through my veins, and the air thick and gray with rain and the damn little men across the street'. 'To annihilate the world by annihilation of oneself', she comments, however, 'is the deluded height of desperate egoism' – against which there is 'no integrating force, only the naked fear, the urge to self-preservation'. The prose here is self-lacerating:

> I am afraid. I am not solid, but hollow. I feel behind my eyes a numb, paralyzed cavern, a pit of hell, a mimicking nothingness. I never thought, I never wrote, I never suffered. I want to kill myself, to escape from responsibility, to crawl back abjectly into the womb. I do not know who I am, where I am going – and I am the one who has to decide the answers to these hideous questions. I long for a noble escape from freedom – I am weak, tired, in revolt from the strong constructive humanitarian faith which presupposes a healthy, active intellect and will . . . I turn wearily to the totalitarian dictatorship where I am absolved of all personal responsibility and can sacrifice myself. (*J* 149–50)

'Whom can I talk to? Get advice from?', she goes on: psychiatrists, 'the God of our age', cost money, she says (and anyway she 'won't take advice, even if I want it'). 'I'll kill myself', she declares; 'I am beyond help' (*J* 151). The tone and rhetoric, as well as the insistence on 'I' and on the despairing phrase 'I am', are uniquely Plath's and will return in *The Bell Jar* and in poems that she was to write almost a decade later.[87] And yet, even at this last moment, just a few weeks before her suicide attempt in August, Plath's 'death unwish' asserts itself as she tells herself to 'Stop thinking selfishly of razors & self-wounds & going out and ending it all' (*J* 186).

More important than suicide for Plath, in fact, is the transformation of her 1953 attempt into a myth of rebirth, into the myth of nonsuicidal (because nonfinal) suicide. In a journal entry from June 1959 she refers to the 'Lazarus theme' and plans a story called 'Lazarus My Love' as one of her 'Mental Hospital Stories' (*J* 497). The 'second birth' of Lazarus appears in 'Tongues of Stone' ('They had raised her like Lazarus from the mindless dead'),[88] and in February 1956, Plath elaborated more fully on the theme,

declaring her 'fascination' with the Lazarus story: 'I feel like Lazarus', she declares:

> That story has such a fascination. Being dead, I rose up again, and even resort to the mere sensation value of being suicidal, of getting so close, of coming out of the grave with the scars and the marring mark on my cheek which (is it my imagination) grows more prominent: paling like a death-spot in the red, wind-blown skin, browning darkly in photographs, against my winter-pallor. (*J* 199)

This is Plath's first rebirth and one by which she is marked, as if by a (re-)birth mark that is also a death-beauty spot. The phrase 'death spot' seems to be a neologism, but the spot or scar that marks Plath's suicide attempt, a scar or spot of dead skin, might, by a certain thinking, be thought beautiful – a death-beauty spot that uncannily *reverses* the changes in pigment against which it can be seen: more pale when Plath's face is tanned or scorched, more distinctly brown against the pallor of her winter colouring. The opening phrase in this remarkable sentence – 'Being dead, I rose up again' – is convoluted in its attempt to express something that is fundamentally impossible: I was dead and I am alive; I am alive *because* I was dead; I am reborn *because* I was dead ('*Being* dead, I rose'). But the suicidality has not ended: she 'resorts', now, 'to the mere sensation value of being suicidal, of getting so close, of coming out of the grave with the scars'. The gift (of death) that goes on giving – suicidality, suicide ideation, the suicide attempt – offers 'sensation value': it is valuable, sensational, but at the same time a dangerous, risky sensation – sensational, we might surmise, precisely *because* it is risky. And yet death by this account is not death, does not involve *being* dead even while, for the sensation to occur, it must do, must be.

The conflation of death with rebirth, of suicide with resurrection, also occurs in relation to electrocution, because Plath's alternative Lazarus myth relates to the electroconvulsive therapy that she received *after* her suicide attempt in 1953. This becomes clear in a journal entry in which Plath writes, a few days after commenting on her fascination with Lazarus, of her momentous and much mythologized, oft-retold meeting with Ted Hughes. Meeting Hughes was shocking, electrical. 'Then the worst happened', she says about meeting him at a party. 'We shouted as if in a high wind . . . I was stamping and he was stamping on the floor, and then he kissed me bang smash on the mouth and ripped my hairband off . . . I bit him long and hard on the cheek . . . blood was running down his face . . . Such violence, and I can see how women lie down for artists . . . And I screamed in myself,

thinking: oh, to give myself crashing, fighting, to you' (*J* 211–12). The convulsive thrill of writing about the thrill of meeting Hughes seems to have given Plath the emotional strength to recall the electroconvulsive therapy in 1953 that 'went wrong', because the passage in the journal about meeting Hughes is immediately followed by her memory of 'waking to a new world, with no name' and seeming to have been 'born again, and not of woman' after her treatment (*J* 212). Plath's 'fascination' with the Lazarus or resurrection narrative is important not only because it features in her most famous and most explicit suicidal poems – 'Lady Lazarus', 'Daddy', and 'Ariel' – but also because in these poems and in *The Bell Jar* and 'Tongues of Stone' before them, the figure of Lazarus allows for a vital conflation of death with rebirth, allowing death not to be final, not to be death, for suicide to have *different* consequences.[89] By beginning *The Bell Jar*, her book on the 'slow lust' of suicide ideation, with the electrocution of the Rosenbergs on 19 June 1953, Plath thereby carefully conflates their *deaths* with Esther Greenwood's *rebirth* through electroconvulsive therapy.[90] ECT, in other words, is figured as both punishment and execution even while it is also conceived of as cure.[91] The pharmakon of punitive electrocution is thus easily translated into that of suicide – a death reconceived as one from which the individual recovers and is reborn, purified, perfected. Precisely because she had come so close to death in 1953, Plath sees suicide not as an end but as a 'thrilling', 'charged' way to purify or perfect herself and to start over.

Unsurprisingly, the poems share such concerns with Plath's journals. In the poems, she sees herself, first and foremost, as a survivor, as someone who has *not* killed herself, or at least as someone who has 'nine times to die' ('Lady Lazarus', 1962; *CP* 244). 'I am alive only by accident', Plath declares in 'A Birthday Present' (1962): 'I would have killed myself gladly that time any possible way', she claims (*CP* 206). Death, after all, 'wants to be loved', Plath comments in 'Death & Co' (1962; *CP* 254). But she *is* alive, even if by accident, and the insistence on her desperate will to kill herself in 1953 only serves to emphasize the power of her 'death unwish', her life drive. 'Eternity bores me', the speaker in 'Years' (1962) declares: 'I never wanted it'. 'And you, great Stasis – ', the speaker goes on, 'What is so great in that!' (*CP* 255). Plath's *un*suicidality, even as self-sacrifice, is also made clear in 'Stings' (1962), when she contrasts herself with the death-driven bees: 'They thought death was worth it, but I / Have a self to recover, a queen' (*CP* 215). In her most famous poem, Plath refers to her 1953 suicide attempt but only to make it clear that suicide is no longer conceived as a solution: 'At twenty I tried to die / And get back, back, back to you', she declares in 'Daddy' (1962; *CP* 224). Nine years ago she had tried to get

back to her father, to kill herself to get through to him; now she wants to be through *with* him.

'Is this the one sin then, this old dead love of death?' asks the Second Voice in 'Three Women' (1962; *CP* 177). The Plathian 'death wish', the 'slow lust' for death, does appear occasionally in the 274 pieces in the *Collected Poems*: it is there, for example, in 'Lorelei' (1958), with its haunting ending – 'I see drifting // Deep in your flux of silver / Those great goddesses of peace. / Stone, stone ferry me down there' (*CP* 95);[92] in 'Tulips' (1961), Plath's 'hymn to the death wish',[93] it occurs amongst the talk of the 'peacefulness' that is 'so big it dazes you' ('It is what the dead close on, finally') and of the desire to 'efface myself' (*CP* 161); and 'I am Vertical' (1961) opens with the declaration that 'I would rather be horizontal' (*CP* 162). In 'Last Words' (1961) the speaker imagines, almost yearns for, a dying and a death that are specifically material: 'I do not trust the spirit', she says. *Things*, by comparison, 'almost purr', they 'comfort me'. 'It will be dark', she says, imagining being dead and alluding to the Assyrian-Babylonian goddess of love and fertility, as she eulogizes 'the shine of these small things sweeter than the face of Ishtar' (*CP* 172). 'Amnesiac' (1962) ends with the appeal to the river of death and of forgetfulness: 'O sister, mother, wife, / Sweet Lethe is my life. / I am never, never, never coming home!' she cries (*CP* 233).

Plath refers directly to suicide in a handful of poems. She alludes to it in passing, for example, in 'Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbour' (1958), where the mystery of a dead crab found far above the sea line is resolved as the crab having died 'recluse or suicide / Or headstrong Columbus crab' (*CP* 97). In the more ominously or suicidally titled 'Lesbos' (1962), Plath's tortured, vindictively panicky poem of domestic angst and rivalry, someone says of the two-year-old girl that 'She'll cut her throat at ten if she's mad at two' (*CP* 228) – seeming thereby in a single line suddenly to fly back from rural Devon in the early 1960s to suburban Boston of the late 1930s. And the topic is contemplated more fully but in a way that externalizes the act in 'Suicide off Egg Rock' (1959) – a poem that can be read as Plath's answer to the measured indifference to personal tragedy that features in W. H. Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts'. Plath's poem describes in some detail the 'landscape / Of imperfections' against which the eponymous suicide, having thrown himself off Egg Rock, is 'beached with the sea's garbage' while people eat hotdogs, children play in the surf, a dog chases gulls, and 'The forgetful surf' 'creams' the 'ledges' of the rock (*CP* 115): 'everything turns away', here as in Auden's poem, from the 'disaster' even of suicide – a disaster that, for others, is not what Auden would call 'an important failure'.[94] Suicide is ordinary, quotidian, everyday, insignificant, indifferent.

But these are, on the whole, references to the suicides of other people. There are just a handful of poems in which Plath clearly presents *herself* as contemporaneously suicidal – in addition to the brief allusions to earlier suicide attempts in 'Daddy', there are really only four. As it happens, these are four of the poems for which Plath is most well known: 'Electra on Azalea Path' (1959), 'Lady Lazarus' (1962), 'Ariel' (1962), and 'Edge' (1963). Each poem presents suicide from a different perspective: as Plath's fate in 'Electra on Azalea Path', as rebirth in 'Lady Lazarus', as an apocalyptic apotheosis in 'Ariel', and as something achieved in 'Edge'.

'Electra on Azalea Path' was written ten days after Plath's first visit to her father's grave in Winthrop Cemetery near Boston in March 1959. The poem records Plath's belated visit while also mythologizing her life and her incomplete mourning for Otto.[95] The speaker conflates herself with, and then sets out to unpick and rewrite the myth of Electra, daughter of Clytemnestra – the mother who murders her husband Agamemnon in revenge for his sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia and who is in turn murdered by Orestes with the help of Electra. As Plath's speaker declares, 'I borrow the stilts of an old tragedy' (*CP* 117). But instead of a tragedy in which the mother kills the father (as in Aeschylus, Sophocles, and others), Plath's poem has it in its clinching final line that it is '*my love* that did us both to death' (italics added). The *real* story is not so much of murder as of suicide, and the Electra myth is, as Jahan Ramazani argues, effectively a 'smokescreen'.[96] The figure of Electra is the focus of the final two stanzas:

> Another kind of redness bothers me:
> *The day your slack sail drank my sister's breath*
> *The flat sea purpled like that evil cloth*
> *My mother unrolled at your last homecoming.*
> I borrow the stilts of an old tragedy.
> The truth is, one late October, at my birth-cry
> A scorpion stung its head, an ill-starred thing;
> My mother dreamed you face down in the sea.
>
> The stony actors poise and pause for breath.
> I brought my love to bear, and then you died.
> It was the gangrene ate you to the bone
> My mother said; you died like any man.
> How shall I age into that state of mind?
> I am the ghost of an infamous suicide,
> My own blue razor rusting in my throat.
> O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at
> Your gate, father – your hound-bitch, daughter, friend.
> It was love that did us both to death. (*CP* 117)

'My mother dreamed you face down in the sea' recalls a fragment from a vivid dream that Plath ascribed to her mother in her 1958 therapy notes. The dream features Otto killing himself ('The father . . . was floating dead, face down and bloated, in the slosh of ocean water'; *J* 432), which Plath interprets as her mother's belief that she had driven her father to suicide: the father in the dream 'slammed out of the house in rage that the daughter was going to be a chorus girl'; 'I . . . feel she feels I killed him', Plath writes of her mother's dream (*J* 432, 447).[97] In this scene – one that is not so much of transgenerational haunting as of transgenerational dreaming – her mother Aurelia's dream points to one of the suicides in Plath's poem, that of the father: the speaker is the 'ghost' of a 'famous suicide' in the sense that she carries the dead father with her, in her; she is ghosted by him.[98] But the other suicide is, perhaps more obviously, Plath herself: 'I am the ghost of an infamous suicide', she intones, alluding to the circumstances of her own disappearance and subsequent discovery in August 1953, when she became 'infamous' through her nearly successful suicide attempt when it was reported in the local papers. Plath is the ghost of herself imagined as having completed her suicide; she is living a posthumous life as a revenant, an 'infamous suicide' who initially achieved a certain local fame or infamy through her suicide attempt.[99] In this sense, it is not just internationally and posthumously that Plath achieved fame through suicide but also immediately, locally, and in the intimate community of her hometown of Wellesley in the summer of 1953. The poem reinforces the idea that she is the 'ghost of a famous suicide' by its talk of being 'an ill-starred thing' because 'at my birth-cry / A scorpion stung its head', and by its reference to 'My own blue razor rusting in my throat'.

The themes of the performance of suicide and suicidal notoriety recur in the second of Plath's suicide poems, 'Lady Lazarus'. Just as Smith is known, above all, for one often misinterpreted and ambiguously suicidal line about waving and drowning, so Plath's most cited sentence is equally problematic (and its suicidality in fact similarly questionable). Indeed, the most shocking thing that you can say about the declaration that 'Dying / Is an art' in 'Lady Lazarus' may be that it is not (or not exclusively or not obviously or not unambiguously) about suicide. It can just as well be read as being about life, about a stubborn insistence on living.[100] The famous sentence needs to be read in the context of what follows:

> Dying
> Is an art, like everything else.
> I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.
(*CP* 245)

There are a number of ways in which these lines are not in fact about suicide. In the first place, and as its title indicates, the poem is about *returning* from death rather than about dying – which is to say that it is *not* about dying and therefore not about suicide. The performance that the speaker announces is not a display of dying, but her own resurrection. Secondly, the dying that the speaker refers to is not 'real': she does it 'so it *feels* real', which logically means that it isn't. It is a suicide *attempt*, the simulacrum, ritual, or performance of suicide, not the thing itself. But it might also be noted, thirdly, that the lines are about *dying* as an art, not about suicide: if Plath had wanted to specify suicide she could have done so; she did not. In other words, like the act as it is figured here, the poem's presentation of itself as suicidal involves a sleight of hand: the poet as showman (or woman) and shaman, as mage and magician, deceiving her peanut-crunching readers into crediting a suicidality that is in fact nothing but show.

As this reading might suggest, 'Lady Lazarus' is also of course concerned with the relationship between suicidality and fame, celebrity, or notoriety. Christina Britzolakis comments that, while the poem is often taken as the 'central instance' of the 'confessional' in Plath's writing, the 'motif of suicide' in fact functions 'less as self-revelation than as a theatrical *tour de force*, a music-hall routine'.[101] In other words, the poem paradoxically offers a *show* of sincerity, autobiographical disclosure, or revelation, a substanceless *performance* of authenticity. And yet it does disclose something, even if that something is the idea that there is only performance, that performance is the essence, that there is nothing outside of (textual) performance. What the poem reveals is that there is nothing to reveal (itself a profound revelation, of course); that all is, deeply, superficial. This is the truth that the 'art of dying' reveals in 'Lady Lazarus': what is revealed is not the dying (not the suicides, the suicidality, suicide ideation, and suicide attempts) but the substancelessness of its artistry.

Substancelessness is, of course, the topic of what eventually became the title poem of Plath's major collection:

Stasis in darkness.
Then the substanceless blue
Pour of tor and distances.
(*CP* 239)

All is surface, foam, froth, and glitter in 'Ariel'. As it is in 'Lady Lazarus', the suicidal unveiling is gendered female and eroticized – here in the dissident and ambiguously sexualized figure of Lady Godiva. But the poem's main focus is on disintegration – on riding, flying, pouring, splitting and passing, flaking, melting, unpeeling; on shadows and being hauled through; on the drive; on evaporation. The poem ends suicidally:

> And I
> Am the arrow,
> The dew that flies
>
> Suicidal, at one with the drive
> Into the red
>
> Eye, the cauldron of morning.
> (*CP* 239–40)

Suicide and suicidality define the 'I' of this poem. The speaker is 'at one' not only with the galloping horse but also with all of these images of disintegration, dissolution, disappearance; the speaker is at one with the I/Eye of the sun, the 'cauldron of morning', the all-consuming fire into which she gallops, flies, evaporates. The I *is* this suicidality, this assertion of the self just in its evaporation, as dewy vapour: nothing more and now no longer.

But like Stevie Smith, Sylvia Plath has a 'signature' poem that has come to define or characterize her *oeuvre* as a whole, to 'personify her reputation'. And as with Smith's 'Not Waving but Drowning', Plath's 'Daddy' is not only about suicide but also about communication and its collapse or breakdown. Indeed, you could say that everything in Plath's poem hangs on the question of communication and its failure. While the 'plot' of the poem is 'starkly clear', Susan Van Dyne comments, the 'language of naked aggression is far from lucid'.[102] The very title alerts us to the question of communication by reminding us of the child's call for a parent and of the distinction between the child's way of talking and the adult's. As critics have noted, the poem's repeated *oo*-rhymes (you, do, *ach du*, shoe, two, Achoo, Jew, gobbledygoo, through) sound out the noncommunicative in the communication of the languageless child – the infant whose way of 'talking' consists of nonsemantic babble (a kind of linguistic larking) – even while its knowing vocabulary of Dachau, Auschwitz, and Belsen; Tyrol and Vienna; weird luck and Luftwaffe; swastikas, fascists, and vampires, jarringly denotes a radically disillusioned and meaning*ful* adult sensibility.[103] And the poem's speaker admits that she cannot speak her father's language (both literally in terms of what she sees as his barbed German tongue and

more generally or figuratively with regard to his way of speaking):[104] she cannot in that sense communicate with him at all, despite the fact that she is writing this poem *to* him, speaking directly with him. This is a communicative aporia: she fails to talk with him as she talks with him. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, given that both the end of her marriage to Ted Hughes and, indirectly, the composition of most of the *Ariel* poems in the autumn of 1962 were kicked off by an adulterous telephone call to the Plath-Hughes home in Devon (a call that was misdirected because answered by Plath instead of her husband),[105] 'Daddy' is about, and indeed *is*, a kind of dysfunctional telephone call – about a disturbance of speech that is undecidably distanced. The poem can end once the speaker is 'through', through *to* and through *with* her father. As well as just through: once *she* is through, through with herself.[106] She connects and the call ends; it ends because she connects and is through, finished, ended.

In this sense, suicide may be said to operate as what we might call the 'transcendental signified' in 'Daddy' – as it does in 'Lady Lazarus', and 'Ariel', poems in which the act is explicitly articulated and in which it is offered, however deceptively, as their ultimate *meaning*, as well as their *telos*, indeed.[107] But perhaps the most difficult poem to work into such a narrative is 'Edge', a suicide poem that resists the teleological suicide pattern and that is unique in Plath's *oeuvre* with regard to what Gentry has pointedly referred to as the 'awful precision' with which the speaker 'shuts down her own body': the poem has, Gentry remarks, 'no parallel in literature'.[108] 'Edge' is the final poem in Plath's *Collected Poems* and possibly the last poem she wrote (it is dated 5 February 1963, six days before she took her own life).[109] The poem is 'specifically about the act she was about to perform', Alvarez avers baldly, even while claiming that the fact that she is writing about her own imminent suicide in the poem is 'almost irrelevant'.[110] And yet beyond the apparent prediction of Plath's death – the woman is 'perfected' in death; her children have been given milk, as Plath's would be before their mother took her own life – and beyond the poem's vocabulary of despair beyond despair (the speaker, the woman, and the moon have 'nothing to be sad about'),[111] or of despair about the fact that there *is* nothing (their sadness is *about* the fact of there being nothing), what is perhaps most striking and difficult about 'Edge' is the way that it moves from a sense of what one critic terms the 'inevitability of death' to something quite other, something beyond a logic of the *telos*, 'the illusion of a Greek necessity' (*CP* 272).[112] This question is articulated most prominently in the poem's last line, a stand-alone sentence in which the focus has switched from 'The woman' of the opening line, to the

moon – still female, but now detached, indifferent, distanced, far away, dead:

> Her blacks crackle and drag.
> (*CP* 273)

In its transitions from colour to sound to the pulling, resistant sensation of movement, the line is about as obscure as any in Plath's often dense, difficult, compacted, often rhetorically wild and allusively opaque late work. The line switches from the visual ('black') to the aural ('crackle') to the heavily somatic ('drag') as it breaks up like a wireless broadcast in a storm – as if in this final line what is breaking up is precisely a message sent over the airwaves from far away.[113] The perfection of death is finally embodied in and as this *im*perfection, as an aural and conceptual drag. The poem is about sense breaking up – both in terms of the aural, the visual, the olfactory, the gustatory, the tactile (all are implicated and all confused, undone in this poem) and in terms of sense-making, of the production and reception of meaning. Stephen Axelrod argues that Plath 'brought her relation to language to a crisis' in the final weeks of her life and suggests that, along with the woman's own death, 'Edge' articulates the 'death of representation' itself.[114] In fact, such crises of language appear elsewhere in relation to representations of suicide in Plath's work. The protagonist of 'Tongues of Stone' is unable to read because 'the words were nothing but dead black hieroglyphics that she could not translate to colored pictures any more';[115] in 'Ariel', 'The child's cry // Melts in the wall' (*CP* 239); in 'Little Fugue', the 'deaf and dumb / Signal the blind, and are ignored' and there is a 'Great silence of another order' (*CP* 187–8); in 'Daddy', 'The black telephone' is 'off at the root' so that 'The voices just can't worm through' (*CP* 224); and 'Words', written just four days before 'Edge' and included by Hughes as the last poem in *Ariel* – the last word, so to speak – seems to present a series of violently disparate, disturbingly unassimilated similes and metaphors for, precisely, words (*CP* 270). Suicide, in this sense, entails a crisis in meaning. Words, after all, are what had been 'heard, by accident, over the phone' when the speaker of that poem hears on the telephone, as Plath herself had done two days earlier, words that should not have been addressed to her: 'What are these words, these words?' (*CP* 202), she cries in that poem, unmistakeably echoing Hamlet's despairingly cynical answer to an enquiry about his reading – 'words, words, words' (*Hamlet* 2.ii.189).

For Plath, as for Smith, then, literary suicide ideation is bound up with the problem of communication and with the way that, in trying to say or express or communicate something, a poem ineluctably drags our attention

back to the crackle of words – to the words themselves that make that saying. Smith and Plath don't just *think* about, imagine, suicide and don't just enact, practice, perform it: they write and publish poems, stories, and novels about it – about thinking about suicide, about attempting it, and even about achieving it. But what is it they are doing? What are they trying to communicate? Is the poem some kind of a cry for help?[116] Are these poets waving? Drowning? Metaphorically phoning? Writing suicide notes? Or are these just poems? Just?

At this point, I want to venture a biographical speculation. To make life bearable, we might surmise, to go on living in their own very different ways, both Smith and Plath needed to ideate suicide, to think about it, imagine doing it, and even enact or practice or perform it. But what is distinctive about these two women (since we know that countless millions of people ideate suicide every day) is that they also seem to have needed to write about it, to communicate their feelings about it both privately and publicly – to make it public, make it poetry. But in both cases, what is highlighted in their writing is the *failure* of communication, its point of breakdown.[117] Just as the notion of self-expression or 'confession' is also necessarily complicated and compromised by its performance, just as it can never be pure, unmediated, or disinterested, never not composed and constructed for an audience, so communication is precisely what the words themselves disrupt, counter, and block. The poems communicate a failure of communication. Plath, in particular, figures the end of communication, its fissure; she figures a resistance to or violent denial of communication *as* communication. The voices can't worm through; the black telephone is off at the root; the blacks crackle and drag.

And yet there is a stark distinction between the representation of suicide in Stevie Smith's work and its figuration in Sylvia Plath's. To put it crudely, Smith emphasizes the *value* of suicide ideation and suicide expression – the potentially therapeutic value of reading and writing poems about suicide – while in Plath suicide ideation and expression are violent, torn, unresolved, unendurable – a 'pain / beyond your knowledge', in Don Paterson's phrasing.[118] While the opposition is far from straightforward, complete, or simple, there is, I think, a fundamental distinction to be made: in spite of her reputation, and by contrast both with Smith and with the primary narrative arc of her autobiographical novel (breakdown, suicide attempts, recovery), Plath talks surprisingly little about suicide in her poems. This may be connected to the fact that when she does so, she speaks in caustic, angry, laceratingly judgemental, accusatory terms – in terms that express what Alvarez calls 'violent resentment': Plath's suicide poems, like many

of the other poems, are 'rage poems'.[119] In this sense, there is little comfort in the idea of suicide for Plath. While she might declare in her journal that 'Work redeems. Work saves' (*J* 310) and while she might seem sometimes to find temporary comfort, succour, even redemption in the act of writing, there is little sense that writing about *suicide* offers such relief. For Plath, suicidality and suicide talk are weapons, instruments of vengeance, revenge, retaliation, reprisal that offer little relief.[120] Suicide is a lacerating *charge*, then, to use that charged word from 'Lady Lazarus', an accusation, an outing or shaming of defective love (a feature of all love, no doubt, but especially of parental love and of maternal love in particular). Alternatively, and as in Plath's poem 'Edge' ('perhaps the most poetic suicide note ever written', Berman declares),[121] suicide is the acme of despair. No longer energized by rage (as she is in 'Ariel'), the speaker is despondent, hopeless, fatalistic, exhausted, done, done in, undone. Rather than being yearned for, suicide is presented here, as it is elsewhere in Plath, as already attempted or practiced or achieved. The poem does not look ahead six days to an act that it predicts or foretells, but instead looks back, impossibly, as if from an undecidable future when all will have been accomplished, perfected, achieved, when all will finally be (all will have been) over.

Stevie Smith on Sylvia Plath

In a short poem from *The Frog Prince* (1966), Stevie Smith seems to make a direct and directly pointed comment on the suicided 'American lady poet' Sylvia Plath. After its pithily caustic dedication, Smith's 'Pearl' consists of just two bitterly cynical, anti-American lines:

> Pearl
> *to an American lady poet committing suicide*
> *because of not being appreciated enough*
> Then cried the American poet where she lay supine:
> 'My name is Purrel; I was caast before swine'.
> (*CPD* 530)

In his edition of Smith's collected poetry, Will May points out that 'Pearl' was not originally written for and about Plath and that it was in fact drafted in the late 1950s with a number of different subtitles – 'a self-portrait in American disguise', 'a self-portrait in a dreary disguise', 'epitaph for an American Poetess committing suicide', and 'lines on a failed American poetess committing suicide' – some of which clearly point towards Smith's own suicide attempt in 1953 (*CPD* 773–4).[122] While the published version

of the poem appears to distance itself from and to satirize the suicide of an American 'lady poet', in its earliest forms the subtitle clearly marks the poem as about Smith herself. In other words, if in the published poem there is a satirical comment on Plath, now famous not least for the way that she ended her life (and certainly the most famous American lady poet to have recently committed suicide), the object of such irreverence is also Smith herself. Retrospectively, Smith aligns herself with Plath while also disguising and displacing the supposed narcissism of suicidal female poethood. In a characteristic gesture, Smith's poem moves from autobiography to allography: she writes of the other in order to write of herself and, in so doing, implicitly acknowledges the links that Plath had already forged, before her death, with Smith's writing.[123]

For both Sylvia Plath and Stevie Smith suicide is a question of performance and therefore of communication – and it constitutes a crisis, in a sense, in both. Rather than articulating the apotheosis of self-identity, sincerity, autobiography, confession, or expression, suicide for both poets involves an undoing of subjectivity, of selfhood, and of language and meaning.[124] Suicide is a message, Jean Améry remarks, a 'senseless' one but one 'without which I would not do what I am doing'; suicide is a message that 'can't arrive at its destination since it does not have one', he continues.[125] As performance and as communication, suicide divides, splits the subject *itself*. Rather than a moment of sublime realization or apotheosis, rather than a *telos*, suicide is figured as abject, dehumanized, commodified, and objectified. Or the act is figured as a glamourized, glittering performance, a rush and a charge, energizing, lively, lovely, loved, hopeful, hope-filled. Suicide and suicide ideation are, in this sense, bipolar. And yet whichever pole we might attend to, it might be said that there *is* no suicide for Smith and Plath (not even for Plath, for whom, in her writing, suicide is figured as a phoenix-like or Lazarean rebirth), only its commodified simulacrum, its performance. Stevie Smith did not, of course, succeed in killing herself – and certainly not in the dominant or canonical sense that I am primarily considering in this book: deliberately, decisively, actively, more or less instantaneously. But while Plath did apparently kill herself in this way, we might also recall Al Alvarez's claim that her death was fundamentally *un*intended, or Ted Hughes's repeated, even if arguably self-serving, insistence over many years that her death was a result of a 'pure unlucky combination of accidents' and 'not at all essential to the poems', that it was 'the remotest fluke, an unbelievably freakish sequence of unlucky coincidences', and that 'accidents accelerated that last week to free fall',[126] in order to think about the relationship between Plath's work and her death as contingent,

aleatory, nonteleological – as *not* essential, necessary, or indeed meaningful.[127] As in almost every suicide, the question of whether or not Plath intended to carry through her suicide early in the morning of 11 February 1963 must finally remain undecidable. But understanding that it was not necessary *is* important. Suicide does not, cannot, define a life, even if it can end it and even while our potential for it marks us and makes us human. Essentially human, one might say, suicide nevertheless has no fundamental, necessary causality. Indeed, it may be said to be beyond reason and causality just *because* it is (only) human. Suicide therefore undoes the sovereignty that it announces. If 'I' is 'a self in the plenitude of its action' that is 'capable of acting sovereignly upon itself', as Blanchot claims in *The Space of Literature*, there is, as he points out, a 'doubling' in suicide that means that 'the one who is thus struck is no longer I': '"I" do not kill "me"', he declares in *The Writing of the Disaster*.[128] Suicide is that which resists, denies, ends the logic of cause and effect, of autonomy and agency, of the alleged sovereignty of the subject. In this sense, and as we have seen elsewhere in this book, suicide does not in itself *mean* anything, however much it looks like it does or must or should: suicide evades meaning because it is beyond reason, teleology, language, sense. (There is no suicide note that can explain a suicide, we might say, not least because a proper suicide note would have to have been written after the fact, after the event that it proleptically records.) Suicide communicates nothing, as such.[129] If twentieth-century writers are drawn to suicide like no others (as Alvarez argues), it is perhaps in part on account of the way that the act chimes with a certain *aesthetic*, one that both invites and evades a logic of reason and structure, of sense, meaning, consequence, teleology: in so forcefully and violently sending out a 'message', appearing to communicate something, the act at the same time fundamentally and irreversibly undoes meaning, autonomy, agency: it simultaneously performs and undoes the very possibility of communication and therefore of the classical conception of literature itself, of what literature supposedly *is*.

'Suicide is an eternal possibility of our life' and for that reason 'always interesting', Irving Howe declares in an aggressively sceptical reading of Plath from 1978. But, he asks, 'what is the relation between a sensibility so deeply captive to the idea of suicide and the claims and possibilities of human existence in general?'[130] It is a crucial question to ask, of course, because it is a crucial question for literature in general. But Howe's insinuation (of narcissism and therefore of irrelevance: there is no such relation is the implication) is perverse. The question of exemplarity that Howe poses is in fact regularly raised, especially in relation to 'Daddy' on account of

its violent juxtaposition of personal psychic pain with historical atrocity (or its articulation of one *as* the other), and indeed specifically in relation to its shocking universalizing declaration that 'Every woman adores a Fascist' (*CP* 223). In a perceptive and in some ways prescient essay published a decade earlier, in 1967, George Steiner had pinpointed precisely this question when he argued that the poem 'achieves the classic act of generalization' in its translation of 'a private, obviously intolerable hurt into a code of plain statement, of instantaneously public images which concern us all'.[131] But the question of exemplarity, which might be asked equally of Stevie Smith and of Sylvia Plath, is already in fact answered by Howe's disdainful phrasing: if suicide is an 'eternal possibility of our life', then the 'claims and possibilities of human existence in general' are, *pace* Howe, precisely bound up with the kinds of questions that are posed by two writers who, in their unique and singular ways, are 'deeply captive' – but as we humans must all in some ways always be – to the idea of suicide.

CHAPTER 6

'What must it have been like?'
Suicide and Empathy in Contemporary Fiction

Michael Cunningham's 1998 Pulitzer prize-winning novel *The Hours* begins and ends with detailed presentations of acts of suicide. The novel opens with a prologue that chronicles the events leading up to and immediately following the death of Virginia Woolf in 1941, and it ends with the suicide of the fictitious Richard Brown, a writer and AIDS victim in New York in the mid-1990s. In both cases, there is a concentrated effort to understand, to imagine, and to empathize with the suicide at the moment of death.[1]

The novel's culminating scene, in which Richard falls, intentionally, from the window of his fifth-floor apartment, is focalized through his long-term friend Clarissa Vaughan, whom he refers to as 'Mrs Dalloway'. Clarissa watches as Richard 'inches forward, slides gently off the sill, and falls'. Although it takes only a moment, the graphic and provocatively visceral description of the act and of Clarissa's response to it continues for almost four pages. She runs disbelieving to the window in time to witness Richard still falling, 'his robe billowing', before he reaches the ground, where she 'sees him kneel on the concrete, sees his head strike, hears the sound he makes'. Still not able to believe her eyes, she imagines Richard getting up and speaking to her. Instead, however, he lies on the concrete uncannily like an undignified version of Bruegel's undignified Icarus disappearing into the waves, 'face down, the robe thrown up over his head and his bare legs exposed, white against the dark concrete'.[2] And in a pointed echo of Bruegel, and perhaps more so of W. H. Auden's laconic description of *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* in 'Musée des Beaux Arts', we learn that it is not an important failure: apart from Clarissa herself, 'No one has seen or heard Richard fall' (*H* 202).

Some hours later, Clarissa remembers the scene and attempts to imagine what it must feel like to throw oneself to one's death. The passage insists on asking, and on the final impossibility of knowing, what it must have been 'like' for Richard to kill himself:

> What must it have been like, the moment he had irrevocably done it; the moment he was out of his dark apartment and released into air? What must it have been like to see the alley below, with its blue and brown garbage cans, its spray of amber glass, come rushing up? Was it – could it possibly have been – a pleasure of some kind to crumple onto the pavement and feel (did he momentarily feel?) the skull crack open, all its impulses, its little lights, spilled out? There can't, Clarissa thinks, have been much pain. There would have been the idea of pain, its first shock, and then – whatever came next. (*H* 223)

Like her namesake in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarissa seems to act as a kind of surrogate for both reader and author here, figuring a key desire in this and other contemporary novels:[3] the desire to know, the impossible, empathic desire to experience suicide, the moment, the very moment, of suicide, the drive to know what it is 'like', how it feels – not only the extent of the physical pain involved but also the very experience of this final annihilation of consciousness, with its 'impulses' and 'little lights'. In this chapter, I argue that the scandalous epistemophilia, the arguably indecent desire to *know*, that we encounter in Cunningham's suicide scene might allow us to think about the limits of empathy, to reconsider that key social and cultural value, that important use to which literature in general and the novel in particular are so often said to be put.

For many, the generation or production or exploitation of empathy (broadly defined as an individual's adoption of the cognitive and/or affective perspective of another person while maintaining a distinction between herself and that other person) is what the novel is *for*.[4] Since the emergence of the modern novel as a key literary mode in the eighteenth century, what was then called 'sympathy' and is now more commonly referred to as 'empathy' has constituted a major justification for the social, political, and cultural utility of fiction and a crucial element in its valuation. Through effects of understanding, identification, and empathy, the process of reading novels can be said to make us, in Richard Rorty's formulation, 'less cruel'.[5] It is the novel in particular that allows or encourages this identificatory ethic of care: from George Eliot to David Foster Wallace, writers have claimed as one of its primary values the ability of the novel to allow readers intimate access to the lives and minds of other people. 'The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist is the extension of our sympathies', George Eliot writes in 'The Natural History of German Life', her 1856 manifesto both for her own realist novels and for realism as a literary mode: a great work of art, she declares, 'surprises even the trivial and the selfish' into paying attention to 'what is apart from

themselves'. For Eliot, art is 'a mode of amplifying experience', of 'extending our contact with our fellow men beyond the bounds of our personal lot'. This attention to what is outside or 'apart from' the self constitutes what Eliot calls 'the raw material of moral sentiment'.[6] As we will see in the final chapter of this book, before his death by suicide a hundred and fifty years later, David Foster Wallace regularly made assertions that chime with those of his Victorian predecessor. In essays and interviews, Wallace repeatedly emphasized the primary function of the novel as a way of exploring what happens inside the heads of other people. David Foster Wallace is like the hyper-self-conscious David Wallace who appears at the end of his most striking suicide narrative, 'Good Old Neon' (from his 2004 short-story collection, *Oblivion*): in a characteristically convoluted thought that also attempts to dodge its own recursive thought processes, David Wallace (himself imagined from beyond the grave by the suicided narrator whom David Foster Wallace in turn imagines) acknowledges that 'the cliché that you can't ever truly know what's going on inside somebody else is hoary and insipid' while at the same time attempting 'very consciously to prohibit that awareness from mocking the attempt or sending the whole line of thought into the sort of inbent spiral that keeps you from ever getting anywhere'.[7] As we will see, Wallace's fiction centrally involves just such an attempt to negotiate his own disabling awareness of the limits of empathy and the determination, however futile the effort, however finally unsuccessful, to overcome those limits.

In an interview recorded in 2003, Michael Cunningham himself claimed that empathy was central to the work of writing *The Hours*. He speaks, for example, of the difficulty of imagining Virginia Woolf's death: 'It was . . . a huge presumption on my part', he says, but there was a moment when, having read 'all of Woolf's work . . . I suddenly felt, "Oh!" It's physical, and I suddenly [felt] myself standing in [Woolf's] shoes'. The process 'almost always starts with some little physical business', he remarks:

> I was standing by a window, and this almost gets a little like drag, but I touched my hair and . . . something happened and there she was. Then I thought I could start to try to write about her.[8]

Cunningham's desire, he says, was to 'write in my own voice', but 'as influenced by [Woolf] as I possibly could be'.[9] After immersing himself in Woolf's fiction, letters, essays and diaries, Cunningham goes on to say he felt that he was 'almost writing with her voice in my head, the way a flashbulb blinds you after someone has taken a picture up close'.[10] And he suggests that this level of empathy also translates into an identificatory or

empathic relationship with his characters, and in this case especially with one of his three protagonist-focalizers, Laura Brown, the profoundly dissatisfied mid-century housewife, Woolf reader, potential suicide, and mother of Richard: 'I thought that I had a real grasp of Laura Brown', Cunningham comments, and 'great empathy with her'.[11]

A number of thinkers also argue for empathy as a key driver in the social, cultural, and political efficacy of the novel. For scholars like Martha Nussbaum, Lynn Hunt, and Stephen Pinker, indeed, novels operate something like empathy machines, both reflecting and producing empathy effects in readers.[12] And efforts have recently been made by neuroscientists and psychologists to produce empirical evidence for a link between novel reading and so-called real-world altruism. In a widely publicized paper from 2013 in the journal *Science*, for example, two psychologists from the New School for Social Research in New York report on an experiment designed to test for the commonly held view that reading literary novels increases empathic responses.[13] In their paper, David Kidd and Emanuele Castano argue that their experiment offers evidence that reading increases empathy because it 'forces us to engage in mind-reading and character construction'[14] and that such effects translate into real-world altruistic attitudes and responses. What is particularly interesting about Kidd and Castano's argument is their insistence on the *literariness* of the works of prose fiction that they use to demonstrate this effect.[15] Drawing on Roland Barthes's distinction between writerly and readerly texts, they contend that it is specifically literary or 'writerly' fiction that produces an increase in empathy on account of its capacity to 'unsettle readers' expectations', 'challenge their thinking', and 'engage' them 'creatively as writers'. By contrast, they argue, popular writing ('genre' fiction, or 'readerly' work) is designed simply to entertain its 'mostly passive readers'. Following Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the 'polyphonic' novel, Kidd and Castano propose that literary fiction tends to lack a single, stable, reliable authorial perspective or voice and that this structural narrative complexity forces readers to engage in what they call a 'vibrant discourse with the author and her characters'.[16] Drawing on Jerome Bruner's work on cognition and narrative from the 1980s, they argue that literary novels compel readers to focus on 'implicit meanings', on the subjectivity or viewpoint of another person (whether invented or otherwise), and on 'multiple perspectives'. Such strategies of reading, they argue, closely 'mimic' those of what philosophers call theory of mind.[17] According to Kidd and Castano, literary fiction has a crucial role to play in developing affective theory of mind, since unlike popular fiction, in which the world and characters in it tend to be 'internally consistent and predictable',

literary novels offer unique opportunities for 'disrupting' our expectations about others' minds, motivations, desires, and intentions.[18] Readers of literary fiction therefore become more adept, more flexible, and better attuned to relating to the perspective of other people. This chimes with the theoretical or a priori position of a philosopher like Martha Nussbaum, who also focuses on the way that the novel allows us to 'imagine what it is like to live the life of another person' and who emphasizes the novel's power to 'disconcert', to puzzle, and to exert a 'frequently painful confrontation with one's own thoughts and intentions'.[19] The literary novel, in other words, is held to be educative and to be socially and politically useful: it makes us better, more altruistic, less 'cruel', and more sympathetic citizens. It makes us people who are better attuned to that which is, and those who are, 'apart from' ourselves.

Historically momentous claims for the novel as empathy-generating machine have also been put forward, most notably by Lynn Hunt in her 2007 book *Inventing Human Rights*. Hunt argues that the eighteenth-century novel can be directly linked to the invention of the philosophical conception of the subject as autonomous, and from there to the social, political, and legal development of 'universal' human rights. According to Hunt, novels such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie* 'opened up its readers to a new form of empathy'.[20] It is not coincidental, she contends, that 'the three greatest novels of psychological identification of the eighteenth century' – Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa* and Rousseau's *Julie* – were 'all published in the period that immediately preceded the appearance of the concept of the "rights of man"'. Such novels, she argues, 'created a sense of equality and empathy' through the reader's 'passionate involvement in the narrative' and by 'imaginative identification' with characters.[21] For Hunt, 'empathy depends on identification', and the reader of an epistolary novel like *Pamela* is encouraged to recognize selfhood as constituted by the interiority of another person – an other interiority or an interiority of the other with which, however, one can also identify:[22] the reader 'simultaneously becomes Pamela even while imagining him-/herself as a friend of hers and as an outside observer', Hunt argues. In reading the extended interiorized discourse of a novel, 'you learn to empathize with someone who is not yourself and can never be directly accessible to you . . . and yet who is in some imaginative way also yourself'.[23]

Hunt's striking position has recently been adopted and developed by Stephen Pinker in his wide-ranging work of evolutionary psychology, anthropology, and sociopolitical history, *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011). For Pinker, reading, especially the reading of novels, is a

'technology for perspective taking'.[24] Following Hunt, Pinker argues that levels of violence have dramatically declined, especially in the West, since the Enlightenment, when, with the exponential growth of literacy and book production, the empathy habit of novel reading rapidly took hold. What Pinker calls the 'Humanitarian Revolution' may have been in part a result of the 'reading explosion' of the eighteenth century: 'by getting people into the habit of straying from their parochial vantage points' and by creating a 'hothouse for new ideas about moral values and the social order', eighteenth-century novels fostered and encouraged empathy and empathic identification in individuals and societies.[25] For Pinker, the result is that we now live in a veritable 'age of empathy'.[26]

Against such enthusiasm for the instrumental efficacy of novelistic empathy amongst some scholars, however, literary critics themselves have tended to be notably guarded about its effects. In *Empathy and the Novel* (2007), for example, Suzanne Keen challenges claims for the empathy effect of novel reading by arguing that there is little empirical evidence for the assumption that the exercise of empathy characteristically involved in novel reading in fact translates into 'real world' altruism or 'pro-social action'. For Keen, it is axiomatic that the fictionality itself of novels 'predisposes readers to empathize with characters' and that novels are able to do so because they do not 'activate' the kinds of 'suspicion and wariness' that we might experience in the so-called real world.[27] The willing suspension of disbelief that fiction allows, in other words, is also a willing suspension of the no doubt inevitable wariness, suspicion, and distrust of others' motives and intentions that individuals experience in the 'real' world and in that world work to inhibit or disrupt our capacity for empathy. But drawing on critics such as Raymond Williams, who asserts in *Culture and Society* (1958) that empathy for characters in the Victorian industrial novel tended to lead to 'withdrawal' from, rather than a movement towards engagement in political action, and Marcus Wood, who, in the context of eighteen-century slave narratives, calls the liberal-humanist belief in the 'healing power of empathetic fiction' the 'dirtiest thing the Western imagination ever did', Keen remains sceptical about the evidence for the 'pro-social' consequences of empathic novel reading.[28] The belief that empathic reading leads to 'improved attitudes toward others' is 'so strong and pervasive that it remains a bedrock assumption of many scholars, philosophers, critics, and cultural commentators', Keen contends, even while the evidence for such a faith remains 'scanty' at best.[29]

Kidd and Castano may be said to have offered at least a modicum of such evidence, but while one may question the perhaps naïve identification of

fiction with empathy in Hunt, Nussbaum, and others, nevertheless Keen's resistance to the empathy model of fictionality may itself be questioned. At one point, she briefly refers to the modernist insistence on literary impersonality, defamiliarization, and techniques of readerly alienation as modes of resistance to empathic reading. But she quickly reminds us of the vibrant concern with consciousness in novels by Woolf, Joyce, and others, concluding that empathic reading was 'never really eliminated' as an essential part of the 'goal of representation' in the novel.[30] Thus, while Keen concedes that the modernist projects of alienation and defamiliarization may have had a marginal long-term impact on the dominant tradition of the novel, she fails to question the basic assumption that novels generally encourage direct and relatively uncomplicated empathic responses.[31] In other words, Keen's difference from those who argue for the empathy effectiveness of novel reading is not that novels do not generate or encourage empathy, but that in doing so they fail to produce 'pro-social action' in the 'real world'. By contrast, I propose that what is singular about literary novels is their tendency not only to encourage but also actively to *confound* empathy: it is not just that they complicate and refine such responses but that they may also resist, undermine, and disrupt them.

The resistance to empathy is particularly relevant to, or in, representations of suicide. The figure of suicide in contemporary fiction – so prominent and so little discussed – tends to introduce a hesitation or complication into, a hiatus or disturbance of, our conception of the novel as empathy-generating machine. Suicide events and suicide ideation are critical and indeed pervasive topoi and narrative strategies in the repertoire of contemporary prose fiction (as they are in different ways in the literary canon more generally). But there is something particularly troubling about such events or thoughts, which may be considered not only as sites or sources of empathy but also and at the same time as *motifs* or narrative strategies that work to restrict or limit empathic identification. Kidd and Castano rightly point to such features of literary novels as their ability to challenge and unsettle readers' preconceptions, and the fact that their characteristically multiple and sometimes ambiguous authorial, narratorial, and characterological perspectives complicate the reading experience in ways that other kinds of text, including popular or genre fiction, tend to avoid. But the literary novel also more powerfully and more concertedly puts into suspense not only our meaning-making but also our empathy-producing capacities, thereby producing what, in a different context, Dominick LaCapra calls 'empathic unsettlement'.[32] This, in part, is what literary novels are *about*: what characterizes such novels is a certain

epistemic hesitation and a resistance to the empathy that a sense of understanding also generates, an unsettling or hesitation over empathizing fully and confidently and in a finally consistent and stable way with a novel's characters or narrators or indeed its author. And this, too – this hesitation or obscurity – may be part of what the novel is for.

Cunningham's *The Hours*, then, hints at the importance for contemporary suicide narratives of knowing, above all, what suicide is *like*. Following the distinguished European canon of suicide narratives in novels by Samuel Richardson, Goethe, Wollstonecraft, Victor Hugo, the Brontës, Balzac, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Hardy, James, Woolf herself, Joyce, Faulkner, Bowen, Salinger, James Baldwin, Sylvia Plath, Jean Rhys, and others, suicide has become a major and explicitly addressed *topos* in novelistic discourse, a primal scene, indeed, of the contemporary novel – but one that may be said to focus on knowing and, through such knowing, empathizing with that which cannot in fact finally be known: on knowing the state of mind of the suicide before, during, and after the act of self-destruction. As we have seen, the post-theological, post-Freudian, post-ethical, modern, and postmodern understanding of suicide acknowledges the act as a necessary and unavoidable possibility in human experience. In contemporary suicide fiction, the simple acceptance of the 'ineradicable opacity' of suicide that early twentieth-century modernist fiction seems to offer is often no longer viable.[33] What is left is an epistemic dilemma – an epistemological as well as an empathic aporia – that complicates and undermines the idea of the novel as empathy-generating mechanism.

Contemporary fictions such as Cunningham's *The Hours*, Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), and David Vann's *Legend of a Suicide* (2008) might be considered exemplary of this condition. Each of these texts is structured around a technical narratological disruption – the transgression of the biography/fiction distinction that occurs in Cunningham's *The Hours* and that is also complicated and disrupted by its triadic overlapping narrative structure; the multiplication and ironic undermining of the fiction of a single and self-identical narrative voice in Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*; a resistance to narrative linearity, logical consistency, and chronological coherence in David Vann's autobiographically provocative *Legend of a Suicide*. Partly on account of these structural narratological perturbations, each of these texts is characterized by what we might term an 'empathy scandal': a resistance to or troubling of the reader's ability to identify, understand, sympathize with, or otherwise experience narratorial, characterological, or authorial empathy. Indeed, the very narrative structure of these books responds to epistemological disturbances or difficulties

in fictional representations of suicide. Suicide is not just a thematic or representational question in these texts but also a narratological and therefore empathic dilemma, as well as, at the same time, an ordering and structuring device. Suicide produces a crisis in language and in representation, an epistemological as well as an empathic aporia that both orders and disorders narrative.

To illustrate this point, I will focus briefly on Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*. Set in Grosse Point, Michigan, a largely white, predominantly Catholic upper-middle-class suburb of Detroit, Eugenides's novel is concerned with its collective (unnamed and unnumbered) narrators' adolescent and ultimately voyeuristic obsession with the suicides of their neighbours, the five teenage Lisbon sisters, in the 1970s. Narrated two decades later from the group perspective of the boys' middle-aged selves, the novel plays out what I take to be the empathy conundrum of the contemporary suicide narrative not least by the way that it links the question with a radical epistemic perplexity.

'Suicide, as a mortal sin, is a matter of intent', Father Moody tells the boys when they ask him why the church has formally recorded the first Lisbon girl's death as an accident.[34] The boys point out that the presence of the apparatus of suicide – sleeping pills, a noose and 'the rest of it' – would all seem to indicate unambiguously that, like her sisters one year later, Cecilia intended to kill herself. But when he is later quizzed about this, Father Moody equivocates: 'It's very difficult to know what was in those girls' hearts. What they were really trying to do' (*VS* 37–8). In a sense, the question of what was 'in the girls' hearts' is precisely what *The Virgin Suicides* and its narrators set out doggedly, morbidly, and with what might be seen as an excessive degree of prurience, to determine – and what they finally fail to resolve. Both the adolescent boys and their middle-aged incarnations as narrators come up against the self-evident truth that Father Moody expresses – against the fact that it is 'very difficult to know' other people, to know, truly know their intentions, their wishes, desires, impulses, motivations. Eugenides's novel is about the narrators' disturbingly voyeuristic desire to empathize with, and the difficulty of knowing, the suicide, knowing what is in her 'heart'.

Much of the dark humour of the novel derives from the profound conflict between its ventriloquistic presentation of the epistemically confident discourses of twentieth-century suicidology on the one hand and the epistemic perplexity that governs the narrators' sense of the girls' deaths on the other. The novel sharply undermines the language of individuals and institutions – medical, sociological, psychiatric, psychoanalytic,

epidemiological, journalistic – that are professionally engaged with suicide via a series of devastating pastiches of contemporary clinical and academic discourses, of the quasi-scientific adaptations of those discourses in the mass media, and of the folksy, informal, highly opinionated, and highly questionable derivations of the discourses in everyday speech. Thus, a journalist from the local newspaper, Linda Perl, claiming to have 'solve[d] the mystery' of Cecilia's death, allows herself to make broad, vapid generalizations about the pressures of the contemporary world on adolescent girls. Adolescence is a 'wasteland' between childhood and adulthood, Perl maintains, a place where 'Self-expression can often be frustrated' (*VS* 96). 'Scouring the neighbourhood in her blue Pontiac', the narrators later remember, Perl 'cobbled together reminiscences into an air-tight conclusion' about the influence of rock music, satanic cults and other fads on vulnerable youths – a conclusion that is, they say, 'far less truthful' than their own bemused meditations, 'full of holes' as the narrators acknowledge their own speculations to be (*VS* 222).

As well as the faulty generalizations of newspaper pop psychology, *The Virgin Suicides* satirizes the quasi-scientific analysis of a Dr Hornicker, who argues that the suicides are a result of that contemporary catch-all 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder', before hastily readjusting his position from crude psychoanalysis to the equally reductive certainties of pseudoscience by identifying what he calls a 'chemical link', citing an academic study by a fictional Dr. Kotbaum from the Western Psychiatric Institute in Pittsburgh on 'platelet serotonin receptor indices in suicidal children' (*VS* 220). The boys also have access to the epidemiological statistics on suicide rates in the late twentieth-century United States – 80 suicides per day, and 30,000 per year; a 3 or 4 to 1 ratio of male to female suicides; higher rates of suicide in 'whites' than in 'nonwhites'; a tripling in the rate of suicides among adolescents (for whom it is the second most common form of death) over the previous forty years; and, hauntingly for the middle-aged male narrators, the fact that suicide rates are highest among white males over 50 (*VS* 98–9). While they seem to indicate more about the narrators than about the girls, such statistics lead to further sociocultural generalizations by the adolescents' parents, for whom suicide is a symptom of contemporary cultural decay. For them, the girls' suicides denote 'Something sick at the heart of the country': tragic, incomprehensible, the acts are a result of late capitalism, of the decline in religion, of a general 'loosening of morals regarding sex', of the 'misfortune of living in a dying empire', and of a general deterioration in civic society that is also observed in potholes never getting repaired, on the one hand, and race riots, on the other (*VS* 231).

Eugenides caustically dissects the inadequacies of the suicide discourses of mid- to late twentieth-century postwar America, then, and even the narrators have to confess that none of these accounts come near to resolving the conundrum of the Lisbon girls' suicides. As a result, the narrators increasingly take a kind of empathic ownership of the girls' deaths, referring to the epistemological privilege that they feel they have earned through their 'long distillation of firsthand knowledge' (*VS* 225). And yet, from the start it is clear that their supposedly objective, empirical account is in fact driven by the personal, the subjective, and the prurient. On the one hand, then, there is the narrators' mock forensic, quasi-analytical discourse that is itself reflected in Eugenides's later characterization of Peter Handke's language in his introduction to the latter's memoir of his mother's suicide in *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* (1972) as 'forensic or paleontological, a process of gathering and comparing, weeding out, of categorizing and grouping'.[35] But on the other hand, working alongside and in some ways in opposition to such pseudo-analytical discourse, *The Virgin Suicides* deploys a kind of hypertrophic metaphorical language that engages in wanton, extraordinary, excessive metaphoricity and operates as a tumescent linguistic analogue for the boys' obsessive, furtively eroticized, concertedly voyeuristic imaginings. The point is emphasized by a rhetorical set piece in which a wildly elaborate analogue is presented for the narrators' investigation of the Lisbon girls' suicides in the testicular examinations that their doctors have encouraged the middle-aged men to undertake regularly. It is in the strung-out metaphorical exuberance of the following passage – a somewhat melancholy, anxious, middle-aged exuberance, to be sure – that we sense the madness, the empirical investigatory obsession, that constitutes the narrators' endeavour to gain an epistemic and empathic hold on the events that they witnessed as adolescent boys. 'Trying to locate the girls' exact pain', they comment,

> is like the self-examination doctors urge us to make (we've reached that age). On a regular basis, we're forced to explore with clinical detachment our most private pouch and, pressing it, impress ourselves with its anatomical reality: two turtle eggs bedded in a nest of tiny sea gapes, with tubes snaking in and out, knobbed with nodules of gristle. We're asked to find in this dimly mapped place, amid naturally occurring clots and coils, upstart invaders. We never realized how many bumps we had until we went looking. And so we lie on our backs, probing, recoiling, probing again, and the seeds of death get lost in the mess God made us.

'It's no different with the girls', they continue, absurdly:

> Hardly have we begun to palpate their grief than we find ourselves wondering whether this particular wound was mortal or not, or whether (in our blind doctoring) it's a wound at all. It might just as well be a mouth, which is as wet and as warm. The scar might be over the heart or the kneecap. We can't tell. All we can do is go groping up the legs and arms, over the soft bivalvular torso, to the imagined face. It is speaking to us. But we can't hear. (*VS* 170–1)[36]

The simile is presented as exact, precise – the procedure is 'no different with the girls' – but is at the same time fantastic, grotesque, preposterous, comedic. The processes of testicular self-examination and of suicide investigation are hilariously, bizarrely compared: in each case the palpation, the tender, probing caress, the investigatory touch, is differently gendered and sexualized and quasi-erotic while also and at the same time gruesome, morbid, death driven. Both are impelled by an uneasy combination of 'clinical detachment' and sexualized investigatory obsession. Wound or mouth, knobbed gristle or sex organ, consciousness or corpus, the body is grotesquely anatomized and at the same time eroticized, probed, and caressed. The desire in this epistemania is intimately involved with dread.

It is this empathic-epistemophiliac dread and desire, then – the desire to know, to understand, and thereby to empathize with the suicide but in doing so to conceive of, to understand oneself, however uneasily – that drives Eugenides's narrative. The narrators see themselves as, ambiguously, 'custodians of the girls' lives' as they 'wander endlessly down the paths of hypothesis and memory' (*VS* 224). And in a final turn as they end their account, they see the girls' deaths as prophetic rather than desolate or despairing. The girls have made suicide 'familiar' and in doing so have been transformed from 'scapegoats' into 'seers' (*VS* 244). The girls have articulated a clairvoyant truth about life, about death, and even ultimately about the planet, with its 'dying forests' and 'used tires stacked higher than the pyramids'. 'In the end', the narrators say, all that can be concluded is that 'the tortures tearing the Lisbon girls pointed to a simple reasoned refusal to accept' a world that is 'so full of flaws' (*VS* 245). And yet despite the explanatory force of these assertions, Eugenides emphasizes the provisional, constructed, enstoried nature of the narrators' conclusions, their need to ensure that their 'intuitions and theories' about the suicides finally 'coalesce' into 'a story we could live with' (*VS* 241). Even the narrators acknowledge that the story they are presenting will never be finally resolved: 'we had pieces of the puzzle, but no matter how we put them together, gaps remained, oddly shaped emptinesses mapped by what surrounded them, like countries we couldn't name' (*VS* 246). They are certain, indeed, only of the

'insufficiency of explanation' (*VS* 247) – for example, that offered by the eugenically, genetically, and indeed authorially named Mr Eugene, who insists, in the contemporary behavioural, psychological, and ethical catch-all, that we will soon have a 'gene for suicide' (*VS* 247). And yet, in a final turn that exposes the fragility of the empathic drive that has governed their investigations, the narrators are fooled into a certain complicity with the suicides of four of the Lisbon sisters and end by condemning what they see as the girls' 'simple selfishness'. To the boys, who say they 'loved' them, the girls' collective suicides constitute their own rejection, sexual and otherwise: 'They made us participate in their own madness', the baffled narrators declare, 'because we couldn't help but retrace their steps, rethink their thoughts, and see that none of them led to us' (*VS* 248). The narrators' desire and fascination, their concerted collective empathy, resolve in the sentimental experience of narcissistic abandonment and the thought, therefore, that suicide is 'deeper than death' (*VS* 249).

Thus the richest, most imaginatively capacious contemporary suicide narratives remind us that what the literary novel more generally is *for* involves not so much a superior or refined form of empathy as an appreciation of empathy's limits. Despite their efforts, the plural narrators of *The Virgin Suicides* seem unable to empathize with the girls and, like their naïve, sentimental, eagerly lascivious adolescent selves, seem profoundly to misjudge them. The novel itself thereby withholds any stable perspective from which its readers might relate to, identify, or empathize with the girls, not least because it withholds the possibility of unambiguous or uncritical empathy with the narrators, through whom the sisters' stories are related. Even that structural oddity, the disjunctive, disconcertingly plural, anachronistically choric narrative voice, ungrounds the empathic requirement of a single, coherent, stable perspective.[37] And this might help us to distinguish a novel like *The Virgin Suicides* from one like *The Hours*.

Cunningham's novel strives at every point, in every strand of its multiple narrative, despite its formal narrative complexity, to empathize with the suicide. *The Hours* is emphatically *about*, and emphatically performs, empathy: the narrator empathizes with the historical Woolf as she kills herself; the fictional Woolf empathizes with the fictional Mrs Dalloway that she invents and with whom Laura Brown also in turn identifies and empathizes; Clarissa Vaughan empathizes emotively with Richard and with Laura; and, like the third-person, singular, stable, authorial narrative voice, the reader empathizes indiscriminately with the historical Woolf, with Woolf's Mrs Dalloway, with Laura, with Clarissa, and with Richard, while the text itself may be said to empathize, in its intimate, ventriloquial, intertextual acts

of impersonation, with the delicately allusive, impressionistically refined yet rigidly structured writing that we encounter in Virginia Woolf's finest prose. And yet, despite its multiple assertions of empathy and empathic identification, Cunningham's novel comes up against the imponderability of Richard's suicide, formulated most starkly as the question: 'What must it have been like?' Like other contemporary suicide narratives, then, both *The Hours* and *The Virgin Suicides* confront us, but in different ways, with the limits of empathy, indicating the place where empathy might end or the point beyond which it might not travel. What contemporary suicide narratives may be said to suggest is that the power of the literary novel inheres just in its resistance to any sentimental or naïve, 'readerly', unequivocal empathic response. In that respect, at least, the significance of the contemporary novel's engagement with or representation of suicide might lie just in the way that it can help us to grasp the limits of our relationships – empathic, altruistic, or otherwise – with those other people, mired in or enmeshed with whose lives we cannot help but live and die.

CHAPTER 7

Inside David Foster Wallace's Head
Attention, Loneliness, Boredom, and Suicide

Being alone, loneliness, solitude, and its attendant solipsistic dangers are major themes in David Foster Wallace's novels and short stories: his narratives typically explore what Don DeLillo calls a 'spiraling sense of isolation'.[1] In essays and interviews, Wallace regularly asserts that the primary function of the novel is to explore what happens inside other people's heads. Old-style realist fiction, he argues in 'E Unibus Pluram', his celebrated 1990 essay on America and TV, helps us to 'leap over the walls of self and locale and show us unseen or -dreamed-of people and cultures and ways to be'.[2] Jonathan Franzen argues in a 2011 essay that Wallace saw fiction as 'a solution, the *best* solution, to the problem of existential solitude'.[3] 'I guess a big part of serious fiction's purpose', Wallace remarks in a 1993 interview, is to 'give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative access to other selves'.[4] Reading something 'that's good and that's real', he comments in a favoured phrase in a 2003 interview, allows us to 'jump over that wall of self and inhabit somebody else in a way that . . . [we] can't in regular life'. But then, he goes on, it 'gets more complicated' because in reading one also has access to 'the mind of the author in a way that we don't have access to each other talking this way'.[5] For Wallace, reading fiction can make us seem 'less alone inside'.[6] But making us seem less alone is not the same as making us not alone, and in Wallace the desire not to be alone is generated precisely by the fact that we are. We are *all* alone, and therefore 'terribly, terribly lonely'.[7] Aloneness is what brings us together, Hal Incandenza comments in Wallace's 1996 novel *Infinite Jest*, in a terrible paradox: that is what 'we all have in common'.[8]

Being alone, of course, *means* being alone inside one's head, and the iconography of David Foster Wallace itself points up the impenetrability of that important body part. In many of the iconic images of Wallace, the short-story writer and novelist wears a bandana, most often a grey paisley pattern on a white background, which can be understood to perform at least a double function: the bandana draws attention to the writer's head

and at the same time conceals it, hides it, denies us access to it. 'What a ghastly enterprise to be in, though', Wallace comments in a 1993 interview of his chosen profession, 'and what an odd way to achieve success. I'm an exhibitionist who wants to hide', he goes on, 'but is unsuccessful at hiding; therefore, somehow I succeed'.[9] Writers are 'weird hybrids', he comments in another interview: 'there's a strong streak of egomania coupled with extreme shyness. Writing's kind of like exhibitionism in private'.[10] In this sense, writing for Wallace is itself a kind of bandana, both concealing and revealing, hiding and drawing attention to the inside of his head. And that indeed is more generally what fiction does, in its own way, when it both points to or points up the author's head and at the same time conceals that head precisely by the object (the bandana, so to speak, of writing) that draws it to our attention. Many of Wallace's novels and stories feature depressed individuals and characters that go to considerable lengths to avoid or to otherwise cope with the isolation of their self-involved narcissism, with what Wallace calls 'terrible self-consciousness', with the searing psychic pain of bipolar disorder or with boredom, addiction, suicide ideation, or even psychosis.[11] Characters engage in inordinate, tortuous, involuted acts of thinking or reasoning, going so far as to involve themselves in exercises in formal logic or in writing fiction or memoirs to avoid or to cope with their mental pain; and they engage in the paradoxical strategies of violence, addiction, serious competitive tennis training, philosophical analysis, and other modes of avoidance and denial. And in some cases they resort to suicide. There is, indubitably, an element of self-reference here, of autobiography, a genre with which Wallace's fiction constantly, playfully, guardedly engages.[12] His own psychological condition is what Wallace may be said both to have revealed in his writing and at the same time to have hidden *by* writing: 'I don't think that he ever lost the feeling that there was something shameful about this', his father commented after Wallace's death, on his son's depression: 'His instinct was to hide it'.[13] In representing people as suffering from loneliness and from clinical depression, and as escaping depression by resorting to the uniquely, indeed the metaphysically solitary act of suicide, Wallace continually draws on the special power of literature both to figure the authorial subject and to disguise it, to hide, to depersonalize the self, to eradicate it in or by articulating it.

And the head is undoubtedly the problem for David Foster Wallace, the writer who once quipped darkly that he wore bandanas because he was 'kind of worried that my head's gonna explode'.[14] Wallace himself identified a philosophical dimension to violence (at least in a mild or symbolic form) towards his head. During an interview in 1993, Hugh Kennedy

and Geoffrey Polk noticed Wallace's habit of 'lightly striking the back of his head with an open palm, a habit which, Wallace noted, descends in a direct line from his father, a philosopher at the University of Illinois Champagne/Urbana; through his father's teacher, Norman Malcolm, Wittgenstein's last student; back to Wittgenstein himself'.[15] But serious pain in, the potential explosiveness of, and extreme violence towards people's heads is a notable motif in Wallace's fiction. Both his first novel, *The Broom of the System* (1987), and his second, *Infinite Jest*, include exploding heads. In *The Broom of the System*, the disappeared great-grandmother leaves behind her a suggestively opaque doodle depicting the exploding head of a barber that, we learn, illustrates a paradox in set theory. And then in *Infinite Jest*, the film genius, patriarch, and tennis academy founder, James Incandenza, arranges to kill himself by the technically complicated act of cooking his own head in a microwave oven (his head does indeed explode, almost instantaneously).

In this chapter, I take the inside of David Foster Wallace's head as my final case study from a century of suicide writing and discuss a small number of the many things – the almost infinite number of things – that may have happened inside it, while at the same time recognizing the impossibility of knowing any such thing. In particular, I think about a series of linked ideas – including the ideas of philosophy, literature, and reading, as well as of consciousness, attention, loneliness, and boredom – in order to think once more about the question of writing and suicide. I focus on the question of boredom – the major topic of Wallace's final, incomplete, and posthumously published novel, *The Pale King* – to come again at the question of literature and suicide.

One of the foundational analyses of boredom in the modern tradition appears in the striking and compelling work of the nineteenth-century philosophical pessimist Arthur Schopenhauer, the first of just five modern philosophers whom Wallace once cited in a list of those writers – otherwise poets and novelists – whose work made him feel that he could have a 'deep, significant conversation with another consciousness'.[16] Boredom is itself foundational for Schopenhauer, a philosopher who, as we have seen, in some ways may be said to inaugurate contemporary conceptions of suicide. In texts such as *The World as Will and Representation* (1818) and his essay 'Additional Remarks on the Doctrine of the Vanity of Human Existence' (1851), Schopenhauer identifies boredom as the condition that underlies, indeed underpins all of human existence. 'Additional Remarks on the Doctrine of the Suffering of the World' (1851) is particularly clear on this question. Schopenhauer starts by proposing that the 'purpose' of

human life must, logically, be suffering, since if that were *not* the case then 'our existence' would be 'the most inexpedient and inappropriate thing in the world' (*PP* 2:290).[17] Since there *is* suffering, in other words, and since there is in particular endless human suffering, since suffering is particularly, uniquely exacerbated by the condition of being human, there can logically be no sense of the purpose or meaning of human life without taking it into account. Suffering is fundamental. If that is the case, Schopenhauer contends, it cannot but follow that suffering is itself (part of) the *purpose* of human existence.

For Schopenhauer, human suffering is an aspect of the quotidian: suffering for us (whether we know it or not) is pervasive, multiple, diverse, unceasing. His proof of the argument that suffering uniquely underlies *human* existence in particular has to do with boredom. In 'Additional Remarks on the Doctrine of the Vanity of Existence', he argues that when we are not engaged in 'striving' for something – for example the 'constant striving' that is involved in our desire for sensual pleasure – we are 'thrown back on existence itself'. And in being so abandoned, the 'worthlessness and vanity' of that existence are 'brought home to us': for Schopenhauer, this experience of a fundamental lack of value is itself 'what is meant by boredom'. The satisfaction of one's 'needs and wants', he argues, amounts to a merely 'painless state' in which one is in fact 'abandoned' to the existential experience of boredom, which is a 'feeling' of life's 'emptiness' (*PP* 2:287). In this sense, boredom is not just a psychological problem but also a philosophical one: it exposes the meaninglessness of life, and as such, it brings us directly into contact with that irredeemable metaphysical fact. As we have noted, in 'Additional Remarks on the Doctrine of the Suffering of the World', Schopenhauer argues that one of the 'torments' of existence is our specifically and singularly human consciousness of time itself: time, he declares, is 'always pressing on us', never letting us 'draw breath', but pursuing us instead 'like a taskmaster with a whip'. The only time that time stops persecuting us, Schopenhauer says, is when it has 'handed [us] over to boredom' (*PP* 2:292). '*Work, worry, toil and trouble* are certainly the lot of almost all throughout their lives', he declares, but an imaginary utopia in which all such concerns were removed, in which all desires were immediately satisfied, would also in fact be a dystopia: people would either 'fight, throttle and murder one another' in order to produce for themselves some element of suffering, or they would 'die of boredom or hang themselves' (*PP* 2:293). Boredom, in other words, is the underlying condition of humanity, its ultimate possibility or promise, and if boredom is not itself the immediate cause of death, it leads directly, ineluctably to suicide. If

you were ever lucky enough to overcome the quotidian frustrations of living, you would die of boredom; but if you didn't simply die of boredom you would take your own life, thereby dying as an indirect result of boredom anyway. Suicide, then, is never far away in Schopenhauer's analysis of boredom. Indeed, given our consciousness of time, our physical existence is anyway, he argues in *The World as Will and Representation*, 'a constantly prevented dying, an ever-deferred death' in which the activity of our minds itself constitutes 'a continuously postponed boredom'.[18] Unlike animals, for whom boredom is 'unknown' (*PP* 2:294), boredom defines the limits of human existence: it determines for us life itself.

Schopenhauer's analysis of boredom offers a way to begin thinking about David Foster Wallace's fiction and about the inside of his head, and to continue our investigation of literary suicide. Philosophical discourse, philosophical ideas and vocabularies, philosophical values, philosophical ways of thinking pervade, invade, saturate Wallace's writing.[19] As the son of an academic philosopher, a high-achieving philosophy major at Amherst, the author of a book on the mathematics of infinity, and, at least for a time, a philosophy graduate student at Harvard, Wallace was undoubtedly aware of the foundational role that the question of boredom plays in Schopenhauer's thinking. And while Schopenhauer provides the basis for a thinking of boredom in modern philosophy, Wallace will also have encountered the question in the work of thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, whose *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1929–30) opens with a brilliant 100-page meditation on boredom that itself builds on and moves away from Schopenhauer's analysis.[20] But Wallace was also fascinated by psychology and psychoanalysis, especially by the para-philosophical discourse of pop psychology, and his prose owes a particular debt to the pervasive and peculiarly American idiom of the self-help book.[21] In this respect, it is worth considering the influence of the Hungarian American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on Wallace's thinking of boredom. Csikszentmihalyi, whose first book was titled *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (1975), is famous for the development of the idea of 'flow' as a counter to the default human condition of anxiety and boredom. There is evidence that Wallace was quite profoundly influenced by Csikszentmihalyi, and it is possible to read *The Pale King*, in particular, as pervasively influenced by Csikszentmihalyi's positive psychology. As it happens, both writers lived in Claremont, California, between 2002 and Wallace's death in 2008 – Wallace worked at Pomona College in Claremont and Csikszentmihalyi taught at Claremont Graduate University – and *Infinite Jest* refers at least three times to a minor character named Zoltan Csikszentmihalyi in what must surely be a veiled

allusion to the psychology professor.[22] But what is most striking is the use that Wallace made of Csikszentmihalyi's widely read book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990), which he owned and carefully annotated. Csikszentmihalyi defines 'flow' as 'a state of joy, creativity and total involvement' where 'problems seem to disappear' in 'an exhilarating feeling of transcendence'.[23] Very early in the book, he explains that the problem he is discussing is that, despite the inordinate luxury experienced by the inhabitants of modern Western society and the historically unprecedented longevity and physical well-being even of many of its poorest, people 'often end up feeling that their lives have been wasted', and 'instead of being filled with happiness' they spend their time on earth experiencing 'anxiety and boredom'.[24] Directed towards personal fulfilment through the achievement of what he calls 'mastery over consciousness itself'[25] (in a sentence underlined by Wallace in his copy of *Flow*), Csikszentmihalyi's critique of modernity as intimately bound up with boredom chimes notably with Schopenhauer's analysis.[26] In another passage that Wallace underlined, Csikszentmihalyi claims, 'The mark of a person who is in control of consciousness is the ability to focus attention at will, to be oblivious to distractions, to concentrate for as long as it takes to achieve a goal'. The person who can do this, Csikszentmihalyi goes on, 'usually enjoys the normal course of everyday life'.[27] Wallace's pithy marginal annotation to these sentences points to a major concern in his own fiction: 'Attention = Control of Consciousness'. Csikszentmihalyi concludes, in yet another comment underlined by Wallace, that achieving a state of 'flow' will 'liberate the psychic energy that otherwise would be wasted in boredom or worry'.[28]

There is evidence scattered throughout Wallace's work that the question of boredom, its potential value (or the opportunity that it offers in one's overcoming of it), and the existential abyss that it also opens onto were important elements in his thinking. His final novel, in particular, investigates the paradoxicality and the intricacy of the structures and strategies of boredom and boredom evasion generated by the work of the US Internal Revenue Service (IRS). The overlapping but separate ways in which Schopenhauer and Csikszentmihalyi understand boredom might help us to think not only about *The Pale King* but also about Wallace's work more generally and indeed about his engagement with the question of suicide. Wallace's writings can be understood to involve, among other things, a literary-philosophical playing out of a Schopenhauerian conception of boredom, and indeed the question of boredom in Wallace is itself a site where the complementary and conflicting discourses of philosophy and literature may be seen most clearly to engage with suicide as a literary-philosophical

concept. In his writing, Wallace confronts boredom as one of the fundamental problems in and of human existence, and like the philosophical pessimist Arthur Schopenhauer he repeatedly links it to death, and specifically to suicide.[29] But as in the work of the optimist psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Wallace is also interested in the idea of controlling consciousness, controlling what one thinks about, as a way of confronting and finally overcoming boredom – and therefore suicide.

Few novels play so intricately, so obsessively, on that balancing of boredom with interest, in fact, as Wallace's monumental 1,079-page novel *Infinite Jest* – the sheer length and digressive, footnoted intricacy of which have been described by one critic as 'at once a challenge, a threat, and an enticement'.[30] In this novel, as in *The Pale King*, Wallace is responding to and developing a necessary feature of the novel form. The genre of the novel is constitutively digressive and therefore, in a sense, constitutively boring, at least in potential, since digression offers the tedium of the irrelevant: the novel in its simplest form is nothing other than a narratological way of getting from A to B by the long route. What the novel demands of us is a certain focus of attention, and what it constantly offers us is the possibility of meaning deferred. But in both drawing out and fending off boredom, novels also enact or perform boredom, allow for or threaten boredom at each moment, enticing us to experience the condition or threatening us with it if our attention is lacking or misdirected.[31] *Every* novel can be boring if it is read in a certain way, if it is not attended to, or if it is mis-attended. Boredom constitutes the structural possibility of every novel, of the novel genre itself, and is the structural possibility in particular of *The Pale King*, a novel that may be said to accord with what Roland Barthes calls the 'text of bliss', the text that 'imposes a state of loss', that 'discomforts' perhaps even 'to the point of a certain boredom'.[32]

Novels, then, fend off boredom, and it is partly for this reason that they concern the question of attention, of consciousness – the question to which boredom is inextricably bound and to which according to Monroe Beardsley 'literary value' is itself related. In a 1981 essay on 'Aesthetic Value in Literature', Beardsley contends that an appreciation of or attunement with such value involves the 'fixation of attention on some portion of the sensory or phenomenal field, a sense of liberation from distractions and practical concerns, a notable degree of distance or detachment from emotional oppression, the exhilaration of exercising perceptual and cognitive powers to an unusual degree, a sense of integration and wholeness'.[33] In an analysis that is weirdly evocative of Csikszentmihalyi's notion of 'flow', Beardsley argues that aesthetic value has to do with the directedness of consciousness, with

the control of the subject's or the reader's attention: in this sense, the literary allows one's attention to be 'fixed' on something in a way that enables one to avoid being distracted by other, 'oppressive' emotions. According to Beardsley, then, the aesthetic in literature has to do with turning one's attention to the literary object, thereby excluding other concerns. Which means, in the first place, that the literary is *about* and is determined by the question of boredom since, as the Norwegian philosopher Lars Svendsen argues, boredom can be conceptualized precisely as the *other* of attention, of attentiveness, as produced either by the saturation and overwhelming of consciousness or by its starvation or attenuation.[34]

Inasmuch as the novel is founded on some relation with the 'real', inasmuch as our interest in the novel has to do with the promise of a kind of or version of (or representation of) 'reality', it is determined, and even defined, by what Roland Barthes calls the 'reality effect', an illusion of the 'reality' of the scene described through the presentation of *unnecessary* details.[35] In other words, the novel includes details of scenes that have no narratological function simply to produce a sense of the 'realism' of such scenes. And just because of such details, we are likely to be bored by the consequent neglect of or obstruction to plot development. This would constitute a further complication in Beardsley's aesthetics: the literary-aesthetic value of the novel in particular has to do not only with the fixing of one's attention but also with the degree to which that attention is also and at the same time challenged, turned away, risked. The logical end of such an aesthetic would not only be an excessively long, detailed, and complex novel like *Infinite Jest* – which continually and excessively challenges the reader not to be bored as she is swept from scene to scene and from the main narrative to digressive footnote and back again – but also writing a novel like *The Pale King*, which takes as its main topic, its main focus of attention, the question of boredom. In other words, the logical consequence of such an aesthetic would include writing a novel that is about but that also inevitably plays out the boredom inherent in, for example, the intricacies of the vast bureaucracy – the ultimate bureaucracy – that is the Internal Revenue Service.

Supposedly written in 2005 by a certain David Wallace as a memoir of his year working with the IRS in 1985–6,[36] *The Pale King* concerns the arrival of new (or newly redeployed) employees of the Internal Revenue Service at its Midwest Regional Examination Center in Peoria, Illinois, in 1985, together with the 'backstories' of those individuals. In addition to the newly recruited David Wallace, the 'author', who is confused with

another, more senior arrival at the Peoria office also called David Wallace, the novel focuses on a small number of characters. These include the 'fact psychic' Claude Sylvanshine, whose attention is continually interrupted by unwanted information; the interminably digressive Chris Fogle ('Irrelevant' Chris Fogle, as he is known); David Cusk, who suffers from attacks of uncontrollable sweating that he can partly limit by controlling what he pays attention to; the suicidally bored Lane Dean; and the excruciatingly dull Shane Drinion. Drinion is known as 'Mr Excitement' because his literalism makes him unbearably dull to talk to, and he also appears to be some way along the autistic spectrum and fails in turn to be bored by the 'totally, wrist-bitingly attractive' (*PK* 447) but also hyper- and tediously narcissistic Meredith Rand. As reviewers of Wallace's book have noted, the major theme or concern of the novel is the question of boredom, the sheer, stifling tedium involved in the low-level processing of income tax data by the employees of the IRS.

One prominent character in *The Pale King* is the anxious, bored IRS employee Claude Sylvanshine, the 'fact psychic' who suffers from a condition known as 'Random-Fact Intuition', a fictional condition in which the sufferer is bombarded by random, irrelevant, and unwanted information – the precise number of blades of grass on one's front lawn, the date that the underwater explorer William Beebe died (1962, as it happens: Wallace's birth year), personal or intimate details of people in one's vicinity, and so on and on. The condition, we are told, is a form of ESP that causes 'overwhelming' difficulties in concentration and 'constant headaches' (*PK* 121).[37] For Sylvanshine, tedium 'is like stress', but is constitutive of 'its own Category of Woe' (*PK* 15). To avoid the madness of this excessive, tedious, unwelcome knowledge, he tries to focus his mind: 'It was true', he thinks: 'the entire ball game, in terms of both the [IRS] exam and life, was what you gave attention to vs. what you willed yourself to not . . . The whole ball game was perspective, filtering, the choice of perception's objects . . . The trick was homing in on which facts were important' (*PK* 12, 15, 16). He is obsessed, indeed, by attention, by what to pay attention to, in a way that is only an exaggerated form of an unavoidable human question. For Sylvanshine, thinking itself is the problem – a problem that he thinks might be countered by a Csikszentmihalyi-like 'anti-stress technique' that he calls 'Thought Stopping'.

As this suggests, Wallace's final novel itself repeatedly, self-reflexively, and perhaps even boringly theorizes boredom. The 'Author's Foreword' to the novel, beginning in the published text at page 66, for example, concerns

itself with attention and with the relationship between attention and boredom. The author-figure or authorial character David Wallace (a figure who is both the author and not the author) ends the foreword to what he calls his 'memoir', with an extended, page-long meditation on attention and dullness. The 'really interesting question', he says, is 'why dullness proves to be such a powerful impediment to attention' and why we 'recoil from the dull':

> Maybe it's because dullness is intrinsically painful; maybe that's where phrases like 'deadly dull' or 'excruciatingly dull' come from. But there might be more to it. Maybe dullness is associated with psychic pain because something that's dull or opaque fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there, if only in an ambient low-level way, and which most of us spend nearly all our time and energy trying to distract ourselves from feeling, or at least from feeling directly or with our full attention. (*PK* 85)

The fundamental condition of existence, this suggests, is some 'deeper type of pain'. We spend our lives being distracted from such pain by various forms of 'stimulation'. Boredom *is* a lack of such stimulation and gives us access to the authentic, unavoidable suffering that, as Schopenhauer would have it, constitutes human existence.

Perhaps the most telling of the many commentaries on boredom within *The Pale King*, and what in the end seems to be a major part of the point of the book, comes in a page-and-a-half section by an unnamed speaker who recalls the two summers in 1984 and 1985 that he spent as a 'cart boy' at the IRS in Peoria. The speaker explains that he learned that 'the world of men as it exists today is a bureaucracy' and that the 'key' to coping with this condition is 'the ability to deal with boredom' – which involves functioning 'effectively in an environment that precludes everything vital and human. To breathe, so to speak, without air':

> The key is the ability, whether innate or conditioned, to find the other side of the rote, the picayune, the meaningless, the repetitive, the pointlessly complex. To be, in a word, unborable. (*PK* 437–8)

This, the speaker declares, is 'the key to modern life': to be 'immune to boredom' – that is, to be unborable – would mean that there would be 'literally nothing you cannot accomplish'. The cart boy's comments alert us to the other side of boredom, the possibility of overcoming it, and indeed the potential *redemption* of its transcendence, the sense of 'enchantment'

that Jane Bennett argues can be generated by the 'institutional complexity' of the vast bureaucracies of modernity.[38]

And what this unfinished, impossible, but brilliant novel produces, finally, is the possibility of boredom. Boredom is not only the novel's topic but also what it both enacts and offers its readers. 'Irrelevant' Chris Fogle is boring because he fails to discriminate between what is relevant and what is not. It is therefore appropriate that the longest chapter of the book – one hundred pages of it – is devoted to his monologue. But Chris Fogle is nothing other than this fascinating and fascinatingly dull 100-page monologue together with other scattered comments by and about him: Chris Fogle is not Chris Fogle but an invention of David Foster Wallace, a novelist who constantly threatens or entices us with the dull. Despite his assertion otherwise, the author of *The Pale King is* Chris Fogle (even if Chris Fogle is by no means the author of *The Pale King*).[39] Much of the novel is dedicated to the minutiae of income tax law and lore – than which (so the premise goes) nothing can be more tedious. As if to illustrate the point and to force us to encounter such boredom, Wallace devotes one three-page chapter to an account of workers at the IRS repetitively turning pages of the documents on which they are working:

> 'Irrelevant' Chris Fogle turns a page. Howard Cardwell turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page. 'Groovy' Bruce Channing attaches a form to a file. Ann Williams turns a page. Anand Singh turns two pages at once by mistake and turns one back which makes a slightly different sound. David Cusk turns a page. Sandra Pounder turns a page. Robert Atkins turns two separate pages of two separate files at the same time. Ken Wax turns a page. Lane Dean Jr. turns a page. Olive Borden turns a page. Chris Acquistipace turns a page. (*PK* 310)

And so it goes on for three double-column pages. This is compelling in its dullness. And yet interest is nevertheless generated by the linguistics of naming in the passage and the sense that there is a withheld meaningfulness in the employees' personal names (names are or always can be funny, always can signify, this suggests). Both comedy and suspense are in fact generated by the intricate attention to the dull, monotonous, repetitive act of turning pages and the possibility of its intricate variety. 'Irrelevant' Chris Fogle, it turns out, is no more boring, no more irrelevant, than anyone else, and the novel implies that there is nothing other than, nothing outside, boredom, tedium, ennui.[40] And yet the paradox of 'art', as Wallace asserts, is that it is *not* just representation: 'What renders a truth meaningful, worthwhile, &c.', the author of *The Pale King* comments, 'is its relevance' (*PK* 259).

Even that which is boring can be art, by this account, even that which is boring can be interesting.[41]

Wallace's novel is unfinished, of course, and we can speculate on why that is the case – we can speculate about the nature of novel writing and boredom, and about the seemingly insuperable feat of writing a novel *about* boredom in order to overcome boredom, to defeat, to transform the experience. In this sense, for all the other ways we may consider it, *The Pale King* is a failed novel, the failure of a novel. But we can glimpse what the novel might have been by reading the notes that Wallace left, on his death, for his unfinished novel – notes that are peculiarly direct and extraordinarily illuminating on the subject of boredom. The first of two 'broad arcs' that Wallace posits for his book is that of 'paying attention, boredom', while what he calls the 'Central Deal' of the novel is 'Realism, monotony' within a narrative that consists of a 'series of set-ups for stuff happening', but where 'nothing actually happens' (*PK* 545–6). One of the characters, the highly literalistic Shane Drinion, we learn, is '*happy*', since he is able to 'pay attention':

> It turns out that bliss – a second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious – lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom. Pay close attention to the most tedious thing you can find (tax returns, televised golf), and, in waves, a boredom like you've never known will wash over you and just about kill you. Ride these out, and it's like stepping from black and white into color. Like water after days in the desert. Constant bliss in every atom. (*PK* 546)

There it is, then: a quasi-mystical transcendence, a redemption at work in the novel's exploration of boredom, the possibility of transcendence, of bliss that may also be said to be at work in the move from Schopenhauer's pessimist analysis of boredom to Csikszentmihalyi's optimistic sense that boredom can be transcended in the experience of 'flow', the ability, as Wallace puts it in another note, 'to be *immersed*' even in the dullest of tasks (*PK* 547). 'Boredom', as Roland Barthes comments in *The Pleasure of the Text*, 'is not far from bliss'.[42] Boredom *is* even a kind of bliss: in Schopenhauerian terms, if it doesn't kill you it will redeem you, allow you access to a form of quasi-spiritual transcendence, an ecstasy of self-abnegation – a state that might itself be seen as a kind of suicide. The bored IRS employee, the employee (or writer or reader) bored beyond the limits of endurance, the employee (or writer or reader) who passes through such boredom will enter a state in which she will abandon herself, give up her will, end her endless, fruitless, intransigent desire for fulfilment, for interest, for

attentiveness, and like Schopenhauer's ascetic saint, indeed, will cease striving for something other than boredom.[43] It is this that boredom offers, that boredom threatens: the multiple, endless paradoxicality of everything, infinity. The paradox of the human torment that is the condition of boredom, the *human* condition, in the end, is that it can also and at the same time offer or at least promise the potential of a kind of self-overcoming, a state of quasi-spiritual self-denial, a 'shattering' of the self that one might describe as a 'Constant bliss in every atom'.[44]

Epilogue

The Contemporary Suicide Memoir

On 5 October 2007, the French photographer, artist, and writer Edouard Levé delivered the typescript of a new novel to his editor at the Parisian publisher Editions P. O. L. Just ten days later, he hanged himself in his Paris apartment. Levé's novel, *Suicide* (2008), can therefore be considered an extended suicide note: narrated in the second person and addressed to a friend who has killed himself, it describes the act of and impulse towards suicide in plangent, haunting, elegiac detail. Referring to the act as 'scandalously beautiful', Levé produces, in effect, something like an aesthetics of suicide in which the disappearance of the narrator's friend bestows on the dead man a 'negative beauty'.[1] While Ludwig Wittgenstein once declared suicide to be 'always a dirty business',[2] there is nevertheless an important if unsettling tradition within the discourse of suicide that figures the act in aesthetic terms. The present book has been, in part, about this cruel encounter between a modernist and late modernist literary aesthetic and the brutal, unacceptable, unfathomable fact of suicide. The aesthetic paradox of suicide is often directly confronted in literary texts just in terms of the rhetorical artistry with which such works describe the act, including a concern with the details of its methodology and its materials. Suicide is almost obsessively *materialized* in literary texts. But an important dimension of what is involved in the aesthetic power of suicide narratives has to do with the apparent ability of such texts to offer teleological and hermeneutic *form* to the chance and contingency of a life. This, in itself, is crucial to the act's potent hypothetical 'beauty': suicide and the narratives by which the act is represented offer to bestow meaning on a life even as it simultaneously transgresses and subverts any such possibility. Suicide appears to assert a bio-teleology that no other end, no other act, can even approach. *Everything* in the narrative of an individual life can seem to be accounted for in (or can at least be subject to) the *telos* of a suicide. Levé himself argues something like this when he comments to his friend that 'Your suicide has become the foundational act'. And yet, at the same time,

suicide also 'alienates'; it voids life of meaning: 'those earlier acts that you had hoped to relieve of their burden of meaning by way of this gesture, the absurdity of which so attracted you', Levé argues, 'have ended up simply alienated instead'.[3]

Literature of the long-twentieth century engages with the meanings but also and especially with the overwhelming alienation or voiding of meaning that suicide engenders, with its grounding ambivalence and with the sense that suicide is both disaster – to be avoided at all, if not at any, cost – and something that just happens, part of living, of everyday life.

In an essay first published in the *New Yorker* in 2011, Jonathan Franzen meditates on loneliness, solitude, and boredom; on addiction, depression, and suicide; on love and friendship; and on Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and the 'rise' of the novel in the eighteenth century. 'Farther Away' is also an account of a solo camping trip that Franzen took earlier in the year to a small, uninhabited volcanic island, Isla Alejandro Selkirk, five hundred miles off the coast of Chile in the South Pacific Ocean. Renamed in 1966 after one of the supposed models for Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (Selkirk was stranded on a nearby island from 1704 to 1709), we learn that locals on the neighbouring islands still refer to the island by its old name, Masafuera (Isla Más Afuera) – 'farther away'. And Franzen's essay is in part about the idea that fiction is 'a solution, the *best* solution, to the problem of existential solitude'.[4]

But the essay is also concerned with Franzen's friend, the writer and suicide David Foster Wallace. Before embarking on the trip, Franzen tells us, he visited Wallace's widow, the artist Karen Green, who asked him to scatter some of her husband's ashes on the island. The essay therefore involves Franzen's reflections on the manner of his friend's death, three years earlier, and in particular on the emotional violence involved in the staging of that death (Wallace hanged himself on his patio to be discovered by his wife on her return home). 'Even here', Franzen comments, 'I can discern a funhouse-mirror Wallace logic, a perverse sort of yearning for intellectual honesty and consistency'. Franzen's interpretation of the act is forthright:

> To deserve the death sentence he'd passed on himself, the execution of the sentence had to be deeply injurious to someone. To prove once and for all that he truly didn't deserve to be loved, it was necessary to betray as hideously as possible those who loved him best, by killing himself at home and making them firsthand witnesses to his act.[5]

For Franzen, Wallace committed a crime that is its own punishment and produced – just in the betrayal that constitutes its *modus operandi* – a justification for that punishment. By a circular or recursive logic that is familiar from his writing, Wallace proves the death penalty to be justified by imposing it on himself in a way that will cause maximum damage to others.

'I . . . dream about someone being put to death as punishment for putting themselves to death', Karen Green writes in *Bough Down* (2013), her prose-poem art book, grief-memoir-elegy for her husband: 'Here murderer and victim are coalesced', she remarks.[6] In an interview from 2011, Green comments, 'When the person you love kills himself time stops. It just stops at that moment. Life becomes another code, a language that you don't understand'.[7] And she talks about her inability to work, to make art, for a long time after the death of Wallace, and how the first artwork that she was able to make was a 'forgiveness machine', into which the observer-participant feeds paper on which she has written her thoughts about those things that she wishes to be forgiven and those that she wishes to forgive: the machine chews up the paper and churns it out, shredded.

Elegy, the mourning poem or grief text, the lament or keening for the one who has died, is as old as literature – and yet no doubt older even than writing itself. Notable recent examples of the genre include Seamus Heaney's *The Haw Lantern* (1987), Douglas Dunn's *Elegies* (1988), Derek Walcott's *The Bounty* (1994), Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters* (1998), Anne Carson's *Nox* (2009), Denise Riley's 'A Part Song' (2012), and Lucy Newlyn's *Earth's Almanac* (2015). The twentieth century also saw the development of the genre of grief memoir – books that record the death of, and immediate mourning for, a person that is and has been loved, whether parent, partner, or other – John Gunther's *Death Be Not Proud* (1949), for example, Simone de Beauvoir's *A Very Easy Death* (1964), Paul Auster's *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), Joan Didion's *The Years of Magical Thinking* (2005), Christopher Reid's *A Scattering* (2009), Kay Redfield Jamison's *Nothing Was the Same: A Memoir* (2009), Joyce Carol Oates's *A Widow's Story* (2011), Julian Barnes's *Levels of Life* (2013), and Marion Coutts's *The Iceberg* (2014). And the last years of the century saw the emergence of books written by the dying about their own terminal illnesses and the process of dying – death journals and memoirs such as Gillian Rose's *Love's Work* (1995), Harold Brodkey's *This Wild Darkness: The Story of My Death* (1996), Tom Lubbock's *Until Further Notice I Am Alive* (2012), Clive James's *Sentenced to Life* (2015), Paul Kalanithi's *When Breath Becomes Life* (2016), and

Jenny Diski's *In Gratitude* (2016), along with journalism by Christopher Hitchens (d. 2011), Tony Judt (d. 2010), Oliver Sacks (d. 2015), Jenny Diski (d. 2016), and Clive James (b. 1939).[8]

Another subgenre, the suicide memoir, is virtually unheard of before the late twentieth century, and perhaps hardly conceivable in an age when suicide or self-slaughter was so categorically othered, seen as the exceptional act of a hero, sinner, criminal, or lunatic. It is only when suicide has become accepted, however guardedly, as an element in what it means to be human, or when it is understood as an innate human possibility, that the genre can begin to emerge. The suicide memoir confronts the finally unaccountable fact of the suicide of a person whom you love. It has a particular *topos* (and therefore a particular register, form, and rhetoric) that is quite distinctive, that is different from other kinds of elegy and memoir because of its focus on the central unanswerable and irresolvable question of *why* the death occurred. A death by illness or accident, even a death by violence, by murder, or in war, for example, simply doesn't raise the same kinds of question; it fails to provide the opportunity for meaning-making. Such deaths do not mean because they cannot; there is no making sense of such a death because there is no sense to be made of it.[9] If the same can finally be said of a suicide, there is nevertheless, by contrast, an urgent sense that there *must* be a sense to it. It is as if, as Jill Bialosky remarks of her sister's suicide, 'The more I know, the more I can bear' – even while, as Peter Handke comments on his mourning after the suicide of his mother, 'I need the feeling that what I am going through is incomprehensible and incommunicable' because 'only then does the horror seem meaningful and real'.[10]

In addition to Karen Green's prose-pictorial elegy for David Foster Wallace, notable examples of the suicide memoir include Handke's stringent, rhetorically ascetic, painfully direct memoir, *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* (1972); Tim Lott's fuller, cultural-historical book about his mother's life and death, *The Scent of Dried Roses* (1997); David Vann's taut but self-contradictory plotting of multiple overlapping versions of his father's suicide in the hexaptych *Legend of a Suicide* (2009); Bialosky's lyrically interrogatory memoir of and for her sister, *History of a Suicide* (2012); Sarah Manguso's evocatively disjointed book about the suicide of a friend, *The Guardians* (2012); Miriam Toews's genre-defying novel-memoir of her suicided sister, *All My Puny Sorrows* (2014); and Jeremy Gavron's photographically enhanced history of the life and suicide of his mother, *A Woman on the Edge of Time* (2015). In each case, the mourning work of writing works through the traumatic and intractable conundrum (the traumatically

intractable conundrum) of another's suicide, focusing on the aestheticization of grief, on the limits of elegiac writing, and on the writer's ultimately futile rage for the order of explanation.

Tim Lott's *The Scent of Dried Roses* is exemplary, in some ways – not least in its insistent, probing assertions of non-understanding, its refusal or inability to make sense of a mother's death. 'The letter was logical and clear, but it made no sense, no sense', Lott writes early on, of the suicide note written by his mother, Jean, and addressed to her husband, Jack.[11] We learn that the letter was written shortly before Jean hanged herself in the upstairs bedroom of her 1930s terraced house in the London suburb of Southall on 'a Monday early in March 1988' (*SDR* 1). Lott recalls the coroner's conclusion that Jean had died 'as a result of clinical depression' – 'as if', he comments, 'it were like a heart attack or a brain haemorrhage'. But for her son, the medico-legal verdict, like the letter, explains very little: 'I needed to learn the secret language of suicide', he says, to 'get inside Jean's head' ('and through it inside my own', he remarks, since her death was preceded by his own serious suicide attempt a few months earlier; *SDR* 23). 'Causes are more like vapour than facts', Lott goes on (*SDR* 34), as he embarks on a social history of the suburban, respectable lower-middle-class London milieu in which his mother grew up and lived from the 1930s to the 1980s. Lott's book constitutes an extraordinary act of research, memory, and imagination, of sifting, organizing, and inventing – as if the sheer power of history, memory, and language could somehow materialize and stabilize the vapours and answer the question that inspires and torments him: 'What does it mean to a family when the mother takes her own life?' (*SDR* 255). Because nothing, he writes, 'could have been as truly unexpected' as that 'strange act' of suicide (260). The act is unaccountable, uncanny. And it is beyond reason, beyond thought, beyond even language.

Lott insists on and ends up in uncertainty, in doubt, and in an avowal of ineluctable ignorance. His memoir can tell us 'what happened', he comments, but it can only fail to answer his father's question: '*Why, Jeannie, why?*' (*SDR* 262). The memoir is made up of a generally chronological but nevertheless finally random series of images and fragmented memories, a 'thin patchwork of disconnected impressions' – some of which may be 'true', many perhaps not – that flare up and disappear into what Lott calls 'the great, bubbling unconscious'. 'We have no common story now' to hold in place the memories and impressions that his book records, Lott affirms, so 'We make it up as we go along, then forget it, and make up something else' because, he says, 'we cannot live without stories' (*SDR* 132). 'I need a story', he later laments, 'and that is the nub' (*SDR* 174) – as if

in rhyming echo of Hamlet's suicide speech – 'ay, there's the rub' (*Hamlet* 3.i.64). But the stories are 'always coming loose, floating away', Lott comments; they 'focus, then blur, focus, then blur' (*SDR* 174). His book constitutes an 'attempt to fix in place what is unfixable, what is always moving, twisting and changing as we watch, finally uncomprehending' (*SDR* 269) – to fix it in place and yet also in the end to undo whatever it is (a life, a violent death) that the book tries to define, to determine, and thereby to resolve.

'I can't wrap this up', Karen Green finally declares as she closes her scrapbook picture-elegy memoir prose-poem lament for the man who has hanged himself on the patio of the house that she has shared with him and with the beloved dogs that, when they come across the successful novelist, short-story writer, and essayist uncannily dangling 'up too high', swinging, lifeless, dead, can make no sense of his senseless body (*BD* 184, 77). 'Undo something', Green hears her dogs demand of her, their 'only human', all too human owner (*BD* 78).

Notes

1 LITERATURE AND SUICIDE

1 See www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/suicideprevent/en/; http://afsp.org/about-suicide/suicide-statistics/; http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160105160709/; www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_395145.pdf.

2 Ronald W. Maris et al., *Comprehensive Textbook of Suicidology* (New York: Guilford Press, 2000), p. 4.

3 For estimates of suicide attempts (or 'parasuicides'), see George E. Murphy, 'Why Women Are Less Likely than Men to Commit Suicide', *Comprehensive Psychiatry* 39 (1998), 165; Murphy uses the 'conservative' figure of 10:1 (parasuicides to completed suicides), but notes estimates as far apart as 5:1 and 100:1. Matthew K. Nock et al. estimate that, internationally, 9.2% of adults 'seriously' contemplate the act ('Cross-National Prevalence and Risk Factors for Suicidal Ideation, Plans and Attempts', *British Journal of Psychiatry* 192 (2008), 98–105); Soazig Nicholson et al. estimate that up to 16.7% of adults in England have considered suicide ('Suicidal Thoughts, Suicide Attempts and Self-harm', in Sally McManus et al., eds., *Adult Psychiatric Morbidity in England, 2007: Results of a Household Survey* (Leeds: NHS Information Centre, 2009), p. 73); while Darryl Watson et al. report estimates of up to 63% for both serious and nonserious suicide ideation ('The Measurement of Suicidal Ideation', *Crisis* 22 (2001), 12). See Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet, *Suicide: The Hidden Side of Modernity*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), pp. 1–4, for a discussion of the number of suicides that any individual might be expected to encounter.

4 George Simpson, 'Editor's Introduction', in Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (London: Routledge, 2002), p. xxiii; Jacques Choron, *Suicide* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), p. 154.

5 Jacques Derrida uses the phrase 'permanent possibility' in relation to suicide in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 156.

6 See Margaret Higonnet, 'Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the Nineteenth Century', *Poetics Today*, 6 (1985), 103, on the questions of free will

and determinism raised by suicide and the fact that 'the hermeneutic task is particularly elusive' in the case of suicides since '[o]nly when the primary evidence has been destroyed does the trace exist to be followed and interpreted'; see also her essay, 'Frames of Female Suicide', *Studies in the Novel* 32 (2000), 229, on suicide as giving an individual life a narrative form and as such constituting 'the essential autobiographical act'.

7 'Normatively monolithic' is from Margaret Pabst Battin, ed., *The Ethics of Suicide: Historical Sources* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 2: Battin's point is that, by viewing suicide as an act that is not 'voluntarily chosen in any robust sense', some recent conceptions of suicide have implicitly asserted that 'there really is no *ethical* issue here' (p. 3). All italics in quotations are in the original unless otherwise stated.

8 Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), pp. 103, 102.

9 Ian Marsh, *Suicide: Foucault, History and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 226. See also Richard Bell, *We Shall Be No More: Suicide and Self-Government in the Newly United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 9, on the fact that 'the very capaciousness and opacity' of suicide make it 'an enormously adaptable weapon in political combat' and as striking 'most directly at the core of questions about individual autonomy and collective organization'; and see Zohreh Bayatrizi, *Life Sentences: The Modern Ordering of Mortality* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), p. 122, on suicide as the 'ultimate political act . . . as the ultimate avenue of exercising individuality and agency over one's destiny'.

10 Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 139.

11 Kelly McGuire, *Dying to be English: Suicide Narratives and National Identity, 1721–1814* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012), p. 17: McGuire argues that in the early novel, the question of 'whether suicide represents a disciplining of the female body or an assertion of agency is explored but never quite resolved' (ibid.).

12 Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Science of Ethics as Based on the Science of Knowledge*, in Battin, ed., *The Ethics of Suicide*, p. 461.

13 Antonin Artaud, 'On Suicide', in Jack Hirschman, ed., *Antonin Artaud Anthology* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1965), pp. 56–7.

14 Jean Baechler, *Suicides*, trans. Barry Cooper (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), p. xx.

15 Kay Redfield Jamison, *Night Falls Fast: Understanding Suicide* (London: Picador, 2000), p. 292. See Elizabeth Leake, *After Words: Suicide and Authorship in Twentieth Century Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011): 'For scholars, the indeterminacy of suicide . . . is what makes it endlessly fascinating'; 'Of all possible deaths', Leake comments, glossing Derrida's *Donner la mort* (1992), 'suicide, it seems, demands interpretation' (pp. 8, 10).

16 Olive Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), p. 426.

17 Michael Cholbi, 'Suicide', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2015 edition), http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/suicide/; Baechler, *Suicides*, p. 457. See also Jamison, *Night Falls Fast*, p. 19, on 'centuries of attempts to explain the incomprehensible act of self-murder'.

18 Anne Nesbet, 'Suicide as Literary Fact in the 1920s', *Slavic Review* 50 (1991), 827. See also Higonnet, 'Frames of Female Suicide', 229: 'By cutting short the "natural" span of life, the person who takes his or her life both turns it into a metaphoric ruin and breaks the frames that society relies upon to produce meaning'. The Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer similarly argues in *Ethics* (1949) that 'suicide is a man's attempt to give a final human meaning to a life which has become humanly meaningless' (in Battin, ed., *Ethics*, p. 683).

19 Ross Chambers, *The Writing of Melancholy: Modes of Opposition in Early French Modernism*, trans. Mary Seidman Trouille (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 90, 89. As Chambers argues, the written supplement of the suicide note conventionally attempts – and inevitably fails – to control the meanings of the act to which it refers. See also Paul Fairfield, *Death: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 74, on the idea that in certain circumstances suicide is 'one way of imposing meaning on what can appear to defy it'.

20 Adam Phillips, 'Cloud Cover' (review of *Night Train* by Martin Amis), *London Review of Books* 19: 20 (1997) (www.lrb.co.uk/v19/n20/adam-phillips/cloud-cover); see also Higonnet, 'Frames of Female Suicide', 231–2, on suicide as producing a certain otherness and thereby engaging with the uncanny.

21 My canonical definition accords with Battin's 'extremely narrow' definition of suicide as 'cases in which a person has knowingly and voluntarily acted in a way that directly and intentionally caused his or her own death, with the intention that death result' ('Introduction,' in Battin, ed., *Ethics*, p. 7). On suicide as a necessarily conscious act, see Antoon A. Leenaars, 'Unconscious Processes', in idem, ed., *Suicidology: Essays in Honor of Edwin S. Shneidman* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1977), p. 125: 'Whatever else suicide is, it is . . . a conscious act of self-induced annihilation'. A WHO report from 1998 declares that for a death to be classed as suicide it must be 'deliberately initiated and performed by the person concerned in the full knowledge, or expectation, of its fatal outcome' (*Primary Prevention of Mental, Neurological, and Psychosocial Disorders* (Geneva: WHO, 1998), p. 75 (http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/42043/1/924154516X_eng.pdf). For a helpful consideration of the problems involved in defining suicide, see Peter Y. Windt, 'What Counts as Suicide? It's Not So Easy to Say', in Battin, ed., *Ethics*, pp. 712–16: Windt argues for an 'open textured' concept of suicide, in which there are 'similarities among the whole family of cases which justify their assimilation under a single concept' (713); his notion of typical or 'paradigm' causes of suicide is similar to my notion of 'canonical' suicides.

22 Durkheim, *Suicide*, pp. xliii–xliv.

23 Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, in Battin, ed., *Ethics*, p. 430; *Chambers Dictionary*, 13th edn. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014), 'Suicide'.

24 See Frank R. Giordano, *I'd Have My Life Unbe: Thomas Hardy's Self-Destructive Characters* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1984), p. 37, who argues that fiction 'provides the opportunity to study the motives and methods of suicides that is lacking to science'. But see Jean La Fontaine, 'Explaining Suicide: An Afterword', *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 36 (2012), 417, who argues that the meanings of suicide 'can best be elicited by the techniques of ethnographic research'.

25 Germaine de Staël, *Reflections on Suicide*, in Battin, ed., *Ethics*, p. 467; Marzio Barbagli, *Farewell to the World: A History of Suicide*, trans. Lucinda Byatt (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), p. 7.

26 Jean Améry, On *Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death*, trans. John D. Barlow (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. xxv. Most thinkers and philosophers who write about suicide do not, in the end, commit suicide. In this respect, Améry – who attempted suicide in 1974, published *On Suicide* in 1976, and succeeded in killing himself in 1978 – is an exception. It is worth saying this in the context of the fact that Améry's remarkable book offers one of the most profoundly insightful accounts of suicide and its meanings – of the *condition suicidaire*: not the death drive as such but a certain 'inclination toward death' (p. 74) – that the twentieth century (and therefore perhaps any century yet) produced.

27 Paul Valéry, 'On Suicide', in *Occasions*, trans. Roger Shattuck and Frederick Brown (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 205.

28 Georges Minois, *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture*, trans. Lydia G. Cochran (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 106; Barbagli, *Farewell to the World*, pp. 81–3.

29 Jonathan Dollimore makes the claim about 52 suicides in Shakespeare and further notes that he has counted more than 200 suicides in 100 plays written between 1580 and 1640 in *Sex Literature, and Censorship* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), p. 149.

30 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), 3.i.55: all further references to *Hamlet* in this book are to this edition.

31 Harold Bloom comments baldly that 'this is *not* a meditation seriously contemplating suicide', in *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2003), p. 34, begging the question of what 'seriously' means in this context; Samuel Johnson's denial is expressed in a paraphrase of the first line of Hamlet's soliloquy – '*Before I can form any rational scheme of action under this pressure of distress*, it is necessary to decide, whether, *after our present state, we are* to be or not to be' – that distorts the speech by conflating the first line with its end (Joseph G. Price, ed., *Hamlet: Critical Essays* (New York: Garland, 1986), p. 285). Examples of other suicide deniers from the vast ocean of *Hamlet* criticism include Irving T. Richards, 'The Meaning of Hamlet's Soliloquy', *PMLA* 48: 3 (1933), 752; H. B. Charlton, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 1948), p. 97; and R. A. Foakes, who argues that in this speech Hamlet 'contemplates both action, taking arms against a sea of troubles, and inaction, death, even suicide', but that the question 'has immediately to do not with suicide, but with action', in *Shakespeare and Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 125, 131. Such is the taboo on suicidal interpretations, in fact, that according to Vincent F. Petronella, A. C. Bradley was the first prominent critic to note the suicidality of the speech in 1904 ('Hamlet's "To Be or Not to Be" Soliloquy: Once More unto the Breach', *Studies in Philology* 71 (1974), 75). Examples of critics who accept that the speech is about suicide include, for example, Helen Gardner, *The Business of Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), p. 49; G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearean Tragedy, with Three New Essays* (London: Methuen, 1949), p. 26; Harry Levin, *The Question of Hamlet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 70ff; and William Kerrigan, *Hamlet's Perfection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), pp. 75–6.

32 Novalis is quoted in David Farrell Krell, 'Introduction', to Friedrich Hölderlin, *Empedocles: A Mourning-Play* (Albany: State University of New York, 2008), p. 7; Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin, 1975), p. 11.

33 Durkheim, *Suicide*, p. 83, n.15. 'Suicide, like crime, was quickly declared part of the normal state', Ian Hacking comments on the influence of Durkheim's work in *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 176; see also pp. 173–9 on suicide as increasingly seen as 'normal' (as opposed to pathological or the indicator in itself of morbidity) from the late nineteenth century onwards. On the opposition of heroic to ordinary suicide, see Dollimore, *Sex Literature, and Censorship*, p. 148: 'more often than not', Dollimore contends, 'literature generates sympathy for, and even glorifies suicide . . . we admire suicides in literature, while at the same time regretting the increasing numbers of ordinary suicides whose motives do not seem noble – unless of course they match the literary ones, in which case we admire them perhaps, if secretly'; although literature 'seductively dramatizes the experience of being suicidally wrecked by desire', Dollimore continues, 'much philosophy offers rational advice on how not to be'. Part of the point of the present book is to argue that twentieth-century literature's engagement with suicide often involves not just 'dissident and transgressive attitudes' but also, and in a sense more troublingly, what might be seen as mainstream, conventional, and often conservative ways of thinking (see pp. 148–9).

34 WHO, *Preventing Suicide: A Resource for General Physicians* (Geneva: WHO, 2000), p. 12 (www.who.int/mental_health/media/en/56.pdf); Jamison, *Night Falls Fast*, p. 39; see also John T. Maltsberger and Mark J. Goldblatt, eds., *Essential Papers on Suicide* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), p. 131: 'That suicide is always more or less ambivalent is now generally understood'; and Edwin Shneidman, *Definition of Suicide* (1985; Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), p. 130. Ambivalence is also a concern in the Christian tradition: while Aquinas denounces suicide in part because 'there remains no time

to expiate the sin through penance', Robert Burton responds to such thinking in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* by pointing out that the suicide might repent and be forgiven even at the point of death, 'betwixt the bridge and the brook, the knife and the throat', as he famously puts it (in Battin, ed., *Ethics*, pp. 229, 295).

35 In this sense, the book might be seen as, in part, a contribution to a current resurgence of critical interest in the 'value' of literature, coming back as it does, again and again, to the no doubt imponderable question of what the literary representation of suicide is 'for': see, for example, Peter Boxall's clearly argued examination of *The Value of the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), and the essays collected in Rónán McDonald, ed., *The Values of Literary Studies: Critical Institutions, Scholarly Agendas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). On the importance of literature for thinking about suicide, see the comment by the eminent suicidologist Edwin S. Shneidman that, for him, some of the 'indispensable books on suicide' are Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*: 'Anyone who reads those wondrous books will know a great deal about suicide', he remarks ('Foreword' to Maltsberger and Goldblatt, eds., *Essential Papers*, pp. xi–xii). The overlap between literary and medical or sociological investigations of suicide is also prominent in Victorian discussions: see Holly A. Laird, 'Between the (Disciplinary) Acts: Modernist Suicidology', *Modernism/modernity* 18 (2012), 535–6, for examples.

36 On suicide ideation (or 'suicidal' ideation) as 'thinking about suicide', see Jamison *Night Falls Fast*, p. 35–7. I use the phrase 'suicide ideation' in this book because of the important sense in which such thinking can in some cases not be *suicidal* as such – and can indeed even be lifesaving.

37 W. B. Yeats, 'Death', in *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: J. M. Dent, 1994), p. 284.

38 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 103.

39 Quoted in Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, 'Death Drive: Eros and Thanatos in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 11 (1999), 267.

40 Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Schreech (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 393.

41 Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 97.

42 E. M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Quartet, 1990), p. 36.

43 Ibid., pp. 36–7.

44 E. M. Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Arcade, 2012), p. 32; Thomas Osborne, '"Fascinated Dispossession": Suicide and the Aesthetics of Freedom', *Economy and Society* 34 (2005), 282. For Osborne, suicidality can paradoxically ensure one's survival and be a 'positive force, an assertion of the singularity of the self beyond any determinate morality'.

45 Margaret Pabst Battin, ed., *The Death Debate: Ethical Issues in Suicide* (Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1995), pp. 278–9.
46 Simon Critchley, *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 81.
47 Baechler, *Suicides*, p. 48; Améry, *On Suicide*, p. 61; Anthony Giddens, 'A Typology of Suicide', in idem, ed., *The Sociology of Suicide: A Selection of Readings* (London: Frank Cass, 1971), p. 113.
48 Baechler, *Suicides*, p. 51. A similar point is made by Edward St Aubyn, who has his protagonist think in the last of the Patrick Melrose novels that while suicide wears the 'mask of self-rejection', in reality, 'nobody took their personality more seriously than the person who was planning to kill himself on its instructions': nobody is 'more determined . . . to force the most mysterious aspect of life into their own imperious schedule' (St Aubyn, *At Last* (London: Picador, 2011), p. 49).
49 See Osborne, 'Fascinated Dispossession', on suicide as 'durability of the will, as will to power', but one that as such also has 'self-defeating properties' involving 'a kind of essentially contested ambiguity' (283): it can be seen both as 'the most voluntaristic and defiant of actions' and at the same time the most passive and fatalistic', he argues; for Osborne, it is the 'paradoxical nature of suicide as an act of pure will that accounts for both the magnetism of the question of suicide in relation to questions of ethics and deliberations over causality and the impossibility of closure in relation to such questions' (283–5). See also Simpson, 'Editor's Introduction', p. xxiv, on suicide as 'an ego-manifestation even though it is an annihilation of the ego'.
50 Critchley, *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing*, p. 80.
51 Ibid., pp. 80–1. For Critchley, however, suicide is deceptive, since '[t]o die means losing the will to die and losing the will itself as the motor that drives the deception of suicide' (p. 83). In 'Death', from *How to Stop Living and Start Worrying: Conversations with Carl Cederström* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), Critchley argues even more forcefully that suicide is 'impossible', but for rather different reasons: 'What one is killing, when killing oneself, is not oneself – it's the hated other that one has become . . . To that extent, suicide is impossible. Suicide is homicide, it's murder. It's murder of that hated other that I am' (p. 50).
52 Artaud, 'Response to an Enquiry on Suicide,' in *La Révolution Suréaliste* 2, reprinted in *Artaud Anthology*, p. 60: 'I feel no hunger for death', Artaud declares. 'I simply hunger *not to be*' (ibid.).
53 Artaud, 'On Suicide', in *Le Disque Vert* 1, reprinted in *Artaud Anthology*, p. 56.
54 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae*, in Battin, ed., *Ethics*, p. 229; see Bayatrizi, *Life Sentences*, p. 122, on suicide as 'the greatest sin because it is a unilateral challenge' and 'an act of rebellion against God'.
55 Baudelot and Establet, *Suicide*, p. 91.
56 Higonnet, 'Frames of Female Suicide', 229; 'maverick' is Alexander Murray's word for a paradoxical act that 'imparts its own paradoxical nature to all areas

of thought it touches' (*Suicide in the Middle Ages, Volume 1: The Violent against Themselves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 12.

57 Laird, 'Between the (Disciplinary) Acts', 541.

58 On the cultural 'othering' of suicide, see Kristian Petrov, 'The Art of Dying as an Art of Living: Historical Contemplations on the Paradoxes of Suicide and the Possibilities of Reflexive Suicide Prevention', *Journal of Medical Humanities* 34 (2013), 347–68, esp. 357–8.

59 Plato, *Phaedo*, in *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 121, 122 (62a, c). Aquinas rehearses a similar reasoning in theological terms: 'he who deprives himself of life sins against God, just as he who kills another's slave sins against the slave's master' (in Battin, ed., *Ethics*, p. 229).

60 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks, 1914–1916*, 2nd edn., ed. G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), p. 91e.

61 Jacques Derrida, *The Death Penalty, Volume 1*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 262 (hereafter cited in the text as *DP*). Derrida argues that in Nietzsche's account in the *Genealogy of Morals* there is a 'hostility to life . . . that is both irreducibly necessary and immanent to life itself', a 'life against life' that 'bears within itself [a] pathogenic or suicidal reactivity' (*DP* 142). See Robert Rowland Smith, *Death Drive: Freudian Hauntings in Literature and Art* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 8, 70–1, on the fact that suicide may precisely be said *not* to be an articulation of the death drive in Freud's thinking.

62 Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 66. See Émile Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society*, trans. Elisabeth Palmer (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), p. 74.

63 'This is how the essence of sovereign power, as political but first of all theologico-political power, presents itself', Derrida argues: it 'represents itself as the right to decree and to execute a death penalty' (*DP* 22).

64 Améry, *On Suicide*, p. 90. I am using the masculine pronoun here to reflect Derrida's insistence on the link between sovereignty and patriarchy.

65 Derrida is referring to a 'quasi-suicidal' individual who is put to death by the state.

66 Derrida, *The Post Card*, p. 227. Simon Critchley briefly addresses such questions in *Notes on Suicide* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2015), when he comments that a rebellion against God and the king by asserting one's sovereignty over one's life constitutes 'the lie of all forms of possessive individualism'. 'Sovereignty is something shared and divided in the complex networks of dependency that constitute a human life', Critchley remarks; 'in relation to the question of suicide, claims to sovereignty very quickly become murky' (p. 35).

67 See Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 95: 'no one is linked to death by *real* certitude. No one is sure of dying. No one doubts death, but no one can

think of certain death except doubtfully. For to think of death is to introduce into thought the supremely doubtful, the brittleness of the unsure'. See also p. 106: 'Both the artist and the suicide plan something that eludes all plans, and if they do have a path, they have no goal; they do not know what they are doing'.

68 Ibid., p. 117; on Blanchot's theorization of suicide, see also Paul Wake, *Conrad's Marlow: Narrative and Death in 'Youth', 'Heart of Darkness', 'Lord Jim', and 'Chance'* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 71–80.

69 Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 103.

70 John Gregg, 'Blanchot's Suicidal Artist: Writing and the (Im)Possibility of Death', *Substance* 17 (1988), 56; Gregg's essay explores Blanchot's alignment of writing with suicide, suggesting that the two acts have something in common since while each 'purports to accomplish something', they must both 'ultimately be considered as failing to do to so' (57).

71 Maurice Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), pp. 169–70.

72 See Derrida *DP* 99 on the death penalty as distinguished from suicide.

73 This would be constituted by the individual's sense of his own sovereignty as what Derrida calls the 'subject or consciousness' (*DP* 116).

74 Quoted in Barbagli, *Farewell to the World*, p. 29.

75 The phrase 'instant of pure self-reflection' is from Smith, *Death Drive*, p. 75; see also Higonnet, 'Frames', 231, on the suicide as a 'doublet: both subject and object'.

76 '[E]ven if the one condemned to death is deprived of life or of the right to life', Derrida continues, 'he or she has the right to rights and, thus, in a certain way to honor and to a burial place' (*DP* 32). See Barbagli, *Farewell to the World*, p. 32: in medieval Europe the suicide was regarded as 'despicable and bestial' and [the] 'lifeless body of the guilty party provoked contempt, fear and disdain, and was treated with deliberate brutality'. The practice of marking the suicide as excluded from the community by burial practices goes back at least to classical Greece: in the *Laws*, Plato specifies that the suicide should be 'buried alone . . . ingloriously in the borders of the twelve portions [of] the land, in such places as are uncultivated and nameless, and no column or inscription shall mark the place of their interment' (in Battin, ed., *Ethics*, p. 83).

77 Karl A. Menninger, *Man against Himself* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1938), p. 70: for Menninger, such 'narcissistic' suicides are 'infantile relics' that 'assume the certainty of a future life, a reincarnation – so that such a suicide is not, in the conscious interpretation of the victim, a real death' (pp. 70–1). Writing in 1938, however, as the 'shadow of universal war', 'another convulsive effort at world suicide' was approaching, Menninger cannot escape the sense of an 'almost joyous preparation for mass suicide' (p. 465).

78 Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, in Battin, ed., *Ethics*, pp. 429, 430; in *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel argues that 'I, as this individual, am not lord over my own life', that '[t]o speak of the right of a person over his life is a contradiction, since

it implies a right of a person over himself', and that 'no one can stand above and execute himself' (in ibid., p. 473); for a discussion of Schopenhauer, see Chapter 2.

79 See Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 103; as he also observes, 'you cannot make death an object of the will' (p. 105).

80 William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 16th edn., volume 4 (London, 1825), p. 189; see also Norman St John-Stevas, *Life, Death and the Law: Law and Christian Morals in England and the United States* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1961), p. 235, on a 1563 court judgement against a suicide as an offence against Nature, God and the King; see also Barbagli, *Farewell to the World*, pp. 113–14.

81 Battin, ed., *Ethics*, pp. 430, 432.

82 J. A. Hiddleston, 'Literature and Suicide', in John T. Booker and Allan H. Pascoe, eds., *The Play of Terror in Nineteenth-Century France* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1997), p. 211; see also J. A. Hiddleston, 'Suicide in the Novels of Victor Hugo', in idem, ed., *Victor Hugo, Romancier de l'abîme: New Studies on Hugo's Novels* (Oxford: Legenda, 2002), pp. 196–211.

83 On suicide as an 'affront', see Lisa Lieberman, *Leaving You: The Cultural Meaning of Suicide* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003), p. 43.

84 Joyce Carol Oates, 'The Art of Suicide', in M. Pabst Battin and David J. Mayo, eds., *Suicide: The Philosophical Issues* (London: Peter Owen, 1981), p. 166.

85 Menninger, *Man against Himself*, p. 24.

86 P. J. Kavanagh, ed., *The Bodley Head G. K. Chesterton* (London: Bodley Head, 1985), p. 275.

87 Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 11 of *The Penguin Freud Library*, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 261. See Robert E. Litman, 'Sigmund Freud on Suicide', in Maltsberger and Goldblatt, eds., *Essential Papers on Suicide*, p. 215: 'Freud often referred to certain dangerous ways of loving, in which the ego is "overwhelmed" by the object. Typically, the psychic representations of the self and other are fused, and the other is experienced as essential for survival'; see also Leenaars, 'Unconscious Processes': 'Freud himself associated suicide and love; indeed, his only ever suicide threats, years before his suicide, occurred during his engagement to his wife-to-be, Martha Bernays' (p. 135).

88 Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, p. 156.

89 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, trans. David Constantine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 103.

90 Edouard Levé, *Suicide*, trans. Jan Steyn (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2011), p. 18; Phillips, 'Cloud Cover'.

91 Martin Amis, *Experience* (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 281, 282.

92 Many commentators have noted this: see, for example, Minois, *History of Suicide*, p. 115; and Higonnet, 'Suicide', 103.

93 Lieberman, *Leaving You*, p. 43.

94 See Durkheim's comments that suicide is 'very contagious' and that '[p]erhaps no other phenomenon is more readily contagious' (*Suicide*, pp. 45, 84), and see ch. 4 ('Imitation'), passim. On the 'Werther effect' as 'largely a fiction', see Bruce Duncan, *Goethe's 'Werther' and the Critics* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2005), p. 1; the phrase 'Werther effect' was coined by David P. Phillips in 'The Influence of Suggestion on Suicide: Substantive and Theoretical Implications of the Werther Effect', *American Sociological Review* 39 (1974), 340–54. See also Michelle Faubert, 'Romantic Suicide, Contagion, and Rousseau's *Julie*', in Diane Piccitto et al., eds., *Romanticism, Rousseau, Switzerland: New Prospects* (Houndsmills: Palgrave, 2015), pp. 38–53; and Michael J. Kral, 'Suicide and the Internalization of Culture: Three Questions', *Transcultural Psychiatry* 35 (1998), 221–33, esp. pp. 223–9, on suicide as culturally contagious.

95 Laird 'Between the (Disciplinary) Acts', 536.

96 Edwin S. Shneidman et al., *The Psychology of Suicide* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1970), p. 38.

97 Higonnet, 'Frames of Female Suicide', 230 (see also 241); see also Higonnet, 'Suicide as Self-Construction', in Madelyn Gutwirth et al., eds., *Germaine De Staël: Crossing the Borders* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), p. 69, on suicide seeming to give an individual's life 'definitive shape' and the act as a form of 'self-construction'. And compare Critchley, *Notes*, pp. 65–7.

98 Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 36.

99 Compare Critchley's comment that he wishes to explore the 'moral, philosophical and existential space for the consideration of suicide as a free act' that is otherwise systematically 'closed down' in philosophical and other discourse (*Notes*, p. 28).

100 Baechler, *Suicides*, p. 3.

101 Carlos Gutiérrez-Jones, *Suicide and Contemporary Science Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Jeffrey Berman, *Surviving Literary Suicide* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), pp. 1, 3, 139; Leake, *After Words*; Laird, 'Between the (Disciplinary) Acts'; Jared Stark, "Beyond Words: Suicide and Modern Narrative" (unpublished PhD diss., Yale University, 1998) (on Baudelaire, Wharton, Camus, and Toni Morrison); Christopher Damien Chung, '"Almost Unnamable": Suicide in the Modernist Novel' (unpublished PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2008) (on Conrad, Woolf, Faulkner, and Hemingway).

102 Deborah Gentry, *The Art of Dying: Suicide in the Works of Kate Chopin and Sylvia Path* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007); Mary Joseph, *Suicide in Henry James's Fiction* (New York: Lang, 1994); Giordano, *I'd Have My Life Unbe*; Berman, *Joseph Conrad: Writing as Rescue* (New York: Astra Books, 1977); Wake, *Conrad's Marlow*.

103 Minois, *History of Suicide*; Barbagli, *Farewell to the World*; Zilla Gabrielle Cahn, *Suicide in French Thought from Montesquieu to Cioran* (New York: Peter

Lang, 1998); John Weaver and David Wright, eds., *Histories of Suicide: International Perspectives on Self-Destruction in the Modern World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); see also Lisa Lieberman's thoughtful study of suicide in post-Renaissance European literary culture, *Leaving You*. Important historical studies of suicide in specific periods include Olive Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*; Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy, *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990); John Weaver, *A Sadly Troubled History: The Meanings of Suicide in the Modern Age* (Montreal: McGill Queens University Press, 2009); and R. A. Houston, *Punishing the Dead? Suicide, Lordship, and Community in Britain, 1500–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Mark Robson et al., eds., *The History of Suicide in England: 1650–1850*, 4 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012), offers an important stimulus for further scholarship, as is exemplified in Kelly McGuire's thoughtful study of suicide, gender, and nationhood in the eighteenth century, *Dying to be English*. Earlier studies examining the theme in relation to specific literary-historical periods include Rowland Wymer, *Suicide and Despair in Jacobean Drama* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986) and Barbara T. Gates, *Victorian Suicide: Mad Crimes and Sad Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

104 Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1989), p. 110; see Victor Brombert, *Musings on Mortality: From Tolstoy to Primo Levi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 146.

2 'THE ANIMAL THAT CAN COMMIT SUICIDE'

1 Albert Camus, 'The Myth of Sisyphus', in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 11 (italics added).

2 Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 130.

3 Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 43–4.

4 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality*, trans. Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 89.

5 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 2 vols., trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), vol. 2, p. 463 (hereafter cited as *WWR* in the text); see also *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays*, 2 vols., trans. E. F. J. Payne (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), vol. 2, p. 295 (hereafter cited as *PP* in the text).

6 Jacques Choron, *Suicide* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), pp. 10–11; compare Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 96, on suicide as 'an exemplary death' and as 'the shortest road from man to himself' and 'from animal to man'.

7 Josephus is quoted in Anton J. L. Van Hooff, *From Autothanasia to Suicide: Self Killing in Classical Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. xiii; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Auto-biography of Goethe, Truth and Poetry: From My Own Life*, trans. John Oxenford (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1848), p. 507.

8 Giacomo Leopardi, 'Dialogue between Plotinus and Porphyry', in Margaret Pabst Battin, ed., *The Ethics of Suicide: Historical Sources* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 496, 497, 498.

9 Edwin S. Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 132; Georges Minois, *History of Suicide*, trans. Lydia G. Cochran (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 322. See also Simon Critchley, *Notes on Suicide* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2015), pp. 71–4, 110; and Margaret Pabst Battin, *The Least Worst Death: Essays in Bioethics on the End of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 227–8. Compare Paul-Louis Landsberg, *The Moral Problem of Suicide* (1951), on the conventions of seeing man as 'a creature who could kill himself and should not do so'; paradoxically, Landsberg contends that 'it is precisely what is most noble in man that may urge him to suicide' (in Battin, ed., *Ethics*, pp. 679, 680).

10 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1991), p. 149; Jean Baechler, *Suicides*, trans. Barry Cooper (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), pp. 47, 35; see also ch. 2, passim.

11 E. M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Quartet, 1990), p. 38; see also *The New Gods*, trans. Richard Howard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 53, 58.

12 Émile Durkheim excludes animals from suicide at the outset of his influential study, on the grounds that they do not have 'an understanding anticipatory of their death nor, especially, of the means to accomplish it', in *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (London: Routledge, 2002), p. xlii; a similar point was made more recently by David M. Stoff and J. John Mann in 'Suicide Research: Overview and Introduction', *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 836 (1997), 3: Stoff and Mann list a number of historical and mythical examples of alleged animal suicide and comment that in such cases it is 'unlikely' that the animals 'possess a conceptualization of death' and that it would therefore be wrong to use 'the definition of suicide as voluntarily and intentionally taking one's own life and apply it to animals'; they distinguish between suicide in this 'human' sense and the 'self-endangering and self-destructive' behaviour of some animals in certain situations. Jean Baechler also denies the act to young children (up to twelve years old), and 'sick people whose mental faculties have been destroyed' (*Suicides*, pp. 42–3). There were lively debates about animal suicidality in the nineteenth century: see, for example, Henry Maudsley, 'Alleged Suicide of a Dog', *Mind* 4 (July 1879), 410–13. For a well-researched discussion of the 'prevailing understanding of suicide as a uniquely human act' as ultimately 'dependent on our understanding of the non-human', and for surveys of changing scientific understandings of animal

'suicide' in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Edmund Ramsden and Duncan Wilson, 'Animal Suicide', *Wellcome History* 39 (2008), 11–12, and 'The Suicidal Animal: Science and the Nature of Self-Destruction', *Past and Present* 224 (2014), 201–42 (quoted from p. 241).

13 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part I: Science of Logic*, trans. Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 40. Compare Leo Bersani's formulation of the Freudian notion that 'consciousness abolishes the objects of thought' and that 'my thought thinks itself as an operation of loss' (*The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 65). Joshua Foa Dienstag points to Friedrich Nietzsche's sense of the lack of time consciousness in animals (animals are 'contained in the present'), and to Arthur Schopenhauer (the animal is 'the present incarnate') in *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 20 (hereafter cited in the text as *PPES*).

14 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 51.

15 On literature and philosophical scepticism, see my *Ignorance: Literature and Agnoiology* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), esp. ch. 1.

16 See *PPES* 103.

17 See *PPES* 36: although the pessimists that Dienstag studies (Rousseau, Leopardi, Schopenhauer, Freud, Camus, Unamuno, Cioran, Nietzsche, and Cervantes) variously advocate 'withdrawal from life into a hermitage or inactivity and . . . pure thought of pure sensation', none finally advocates suicide, and some, like Albert Camus, are impelled by their thinking of suicide into politically committed action (*PPES* 37): in general, their aim, Dienstag comments, is to 'find reasons to oppose' suicide (*PPES* 103).

18 Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, pp. 96–7. See Arthur Schopenhauer's contention that 'even the highest animals' lack 'concepts and thought', in 'The Doctrine of the Suffering of the World' (*PP* 2:298); see also *WWR* 1:36: 'reflection', the 'abstract reflex of everything intuitive in the non-perceptive conception of reason', is said to 'endow man' with 'that thoughtfulness which so completely distinguishes his consciousness from that of the animal'. For a more recent discussion of this question, see Robert W. Lurz, ed., *The Philosophy of Animal Minds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

19 See G. W. F. Hegel's *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), p. 80: 'precisely because he knows that he is animal, [man] ceases to be animal'.

20 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 12; Charles Turner, 'Scenographies of Suicide: Hitler and His Victims', *Economy and Society* 34 (2005), 267.

21 David Foster Wallace, 'Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness from Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed ', in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (London: Abacus, 2005), p. 64.

22 Sigmund Freud, 'Creative Writing and Day Dreaming', in *Art and Literature*, vol. 14 of *The Penguin Freud Library*, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 138.

23 Adam Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 82. For a similar idea, see Giacomo Leopardi, 'The History of the Human Race' (1824), in *Moral Tales*, trans. Patrick Creagh (Manchester: Carcanet, 1983), pp. 24–5.
24 See Dale Jacquette, 'Schopenhauer on the Ethics of Suicide', *Continental Philosophy Review* 33 (2000), 49–50.
25 The suicide, according to Schopenhauer, 'denies merely the individual, not the species' (*WWR* 1:399). See, however, *WWR* 1:400–02 on suicide by starvation of the ascetic as a cessation of the will.
26 Eric A. Plaut, 'Marx on Suicide in the Context of Other Views of Suicide and of His Life', in Plaut and Kevin Anderson, eds., *Marx on Suicide* (Evaston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999), p. 30.
27 Karl A. Menninger, *Man against Himself* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1938), p. 471.
28 Robert E. Litman, 'Sigmund Freud on Suicide', in John T. Maltsberger and Mark J. Goldblatt, eds., *Essential Papers on Suicide* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), p. 214; on psychoanalysis and suicide, see also Rosine Jozef Perelberg, ed., *Psychoanalytic Understanding of Violence and Suicide* (London: Routledge, 1999).
29 Sigmund Freud, 'Contribution to a Discussion on Suicide', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume 11: Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 232.
30 Sigmund Freud, 'The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman', in *Case Histories II*, vol. 9 of *The Penguin Freud Library*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 389; see also Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 11 of *The Penguin Freud Library*, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 261.
31 Freud, 'The Ego and the Id', in *On Metapsychology*, p. 394.
32 Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, vol. 5 of *The Penguin Freud Library*, trans. Alan Tyson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), pp. 235–6.
33 S. A. K. [Samuel] Strahan, *Suicide and Insanity: A Physiological and Sociological Study* (London: S. Sonnenschein, 1893), pp. 28–9. In fact, the self-preservation argument goes back at least to Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century: suicide is 'contrary to natural inclination' since 'every thing loves itself' (in Battin, ed., *Ethics*, p.229).
34 Ibid., p.30.
35 As Freud comments, he has 'unwittingly steered our course into the harbour of Schopenhauer's philosophy' ('Beyond the Pleasure Principle', in *On Metapsychology*, p. 322).
36 Ibid., p. 311.
37 Ibid., p. 312.
38 Robert Smith, *Death Drive: Freudian Hauntings in Literature and Art* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. xiv, 8. Smith seeks to 'recalibrate' the artwork with the death drive, arguing that artworks are, as such, 'irreducibly

organised by . . . an adherence or loyalty to a state of impassive disengagement with anything beyond themselves (pp. 24, 25).

39 Ibid., p. 69.

40 Ibid., p. 70.

41 Ibid., p. 71.

42 Menninger, *Man against Himself*, p. 5.

43 Ibid., pp. 50, 66, 55.

44 See Marzio Barbagli, *Farewell to the World: A History of Suicide*, trans. Lucinda Byatt (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), pp. 83–4; Brian Barraclough and Daphne Shepherd, 'A Necessary Neologism: The Origin and Uses of *Suicide*', *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 24 (1994), 113–26; and Kelly McGuire, *Dying to be English: Suicide Narratives and National Identity, 1721–1814* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012), pp. 1–2. And see Andreas Bähr, 'Between "Self-Murder" and "Suicide": The Modern Etymology of Self-Killing', *Journal of Social History* 46 (2013), 623, on the 'new epistemology' that emerges in the late seventeenth century alongside the increasing use of *non compos mentis* judgement and the term 'suicide': both the 'reprehensibility' and the 'criminal judgment' of the deed were 'deduced from the moral assessment of the person'.

45 Rowland Wymer, *Suicide and Despair in the Jacobean Drama* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), pp. 24–5; for a reading of the question of 'conscience' in Hamlet's speech, see pp. 29–36. See also Eric Langley's comment in *Narcissism and Suicide in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) that early modern drama 'incorporates suicide as an integral aspect of its broader consideration of humanist self-determination' (p. 253) and that both the narcissist and the suicide stand as 'negative exemplars of excessive self-subjection and self-involvement, as advocates of gratuitously isolationist self-sufficiency', and as 'cautionary figures of immoderate individualism' (p. 2).

46 Michael MacDonald, 'The Medicalization of Suicide in England: Laymen, Physicians, and Cultural Change, 1500–1870', in Charles E. Rosenberg and Janet Golden, eds., *Framing Disease: Studies in Cultural History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), pp. 89–91.

47 Ibid., p. 95; Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy, *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), p. 144; see also p. 109 and chs. 4 and 5 passim.

48 William Rowley, *A Treatise on Female, Nervous, Hysterical, Hypochondriacal, Bilious, Convulsive Diseases; Apoplexy and Palsy; with Thoughts on Madness, Suicide &c.* (London: C. Nourse, 1788), p. 343.

49 Barbagli, *Farewell to the World*, p. 78; compare MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, p. 5.

50 MacDonald, 'The Medicalization of Suicide in England', pp. 97–8.

51 Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Stay: A History of Suicide and the Philosophies against It* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 9.

52 Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1755), 'suicide'.

53 See Bähr, 'Between "Self-Murder" and "Suicide"', 621 and passim.

54 It is not perhaps by chance that David Hume's *Of Suicide* (written in 1755) was first published (anonymously and in French) in 1770.
55 Zilla Gabrielle Cahn, *Suicide in French Thought from Montesquieu to Cioran* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), p. 140.
56 J. A. Hiddleston, 'Literature and Suicide', in John T. Booker and Allan H. Pascoe, eds., *The Play of Terror in Nineteenth-Century France* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1997), p. 212; on the Romantic culture of posterity, see Andrew Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
57 MacDonald, 'The Medicalization of Suicide in England', p. 94.
58 As Deanna P. Koretsky declares, 'Romantic literature can't stop talking about suicide' ('"Unhallowed Arts": *Frankenstein* and the Poetics of Suicide', *European Romantic Review* 26 (2015), 241); see MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, pp. 190–6, for an account of suicide in Romantic literature; and see Michelle Faubert and Nicole Reynolds, eds., special issue on 'Romanticism and Suicide', *Literature Compass* 12 (2015), for essays on female suicide in the Romantic period.
59 Frederick L. Jones, ed., *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964), vol. 1, p. 36; vol. 2, p. 433.
60 See Barbagli, *Farewell to the World*, pp. 102–06: Barbagli links the apparent increase in the number of suicides in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to economic and intellectual developments that promoted an ideology of individual autonomy. See also Koretsky, '"Unhallowed Arts"', 241–2, on the tension between Enlightenment and Romantic conceptions of suicide.
61 Minois, *History of Suicide*, p. 300. Margaret Higonnet comments that 'the very notion of suicide as an intentional act dissipates in the course of its scientific reassessment' ('Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the Nineteenth Century', *Poetics Today*, 6 (1985), 105).
62 Minois, *History of Suicide*, p. 223.
63 McGuire, *Dying to be English*, pp. 15, 187–8.
64 Durkheim, *Suicide*, pp. 168, 175.
65 Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet, *Suicide: The Hidden Side of Modernity*, trans. David Macey (London: Polity, 2008), p. 33.
66 Ian Marsh, *Suicide: Foucault, History and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 91.
67 Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume II*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 84.
68 On the importance of suicide in Mary Shelley's life and work (and as 'central' to *Frankenstein*), see Koretsky, '"Unhallowed Arts"'; see also Michelle Faubert, 'A Family Affair: Ennobling Suicide in Mary Shelley's *Matilda*', *Essays in Romanticism* 20 (2013), 101–28; see also 'The Fictional Suicides of Mary Wollstonecraft', *Literature Compass* 12 (2015), 652–9.
69 See Barbagli, *Farewell to the World*, p. 99, on suicide in revolutionary France (forfeiture of the suicide's worldly goods was reinstituted briefly in 1793 and rescinded again in 1795).

70 Olive Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), p. 205.

71 See Andrew Bennett '"Suffering is permanent": Wordsworth, Despondency and the Poetics of Irredeemable Loss', *Essays in English Romanticism* 38 (2014), 31–46.

72 See Barbara T. Gates, *Victorian Suicide: Mad Crimes and Sad Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 90–1.

73 On the 'feminization' of suicide and on suicide as a 'female malady' in the nineteenth century, see ibid., p. 98 and ch.7 passim; see also L. J. Nicoletti, 'Downward Mobility: Victorian Women, Suicide, and London's "Bridge of Sighs"', *Literary London Journal* 2 (2004) (np: online). Kelly McGuire argues that the feminization of suicide in fact occurs in the eighteenth century – even though it is also contested with regard to the limitations on female agency: it is both a 'heroic and therefore masculine act' and at the same time 'subsumed into the "effeminate" continuum of luxury and consumption' (*Dying to be English*, p. 12). This is related to what in the context of classical tragedy Nicole Loraux calls the 'law of femininity' – that in 'the extreme of misery' suicide provides an escape (*Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, trans. Anthony Forster (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 8).

74 For a list of suicides in Tennyson's poems, see Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson*, 2nd edn. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 97n; for poems figuring martyrdom and self-sacrifice, see 101n.

75 James Thomson, *City of Dreadful Night*, in *Victorian Literature: An Anthology*, ed. Victor Shea and William Whitla (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 709, 711 (canto 13, line 49; canto 14, line 83).

76 Some of these biographical details are transmuted into Meredith's novel *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel: A History of Father and Son* (1859). On the ambivalent contemporary responses to Wallis's painting (and to the Chatterton myth itself), see Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, pp. 25–6.

77 Choron, *Suicide*, p. 31; Choron also counts thirteen suicides in Dostoevsky's 'five great novels' (ibid.).

78 Hiddleston, 'Suicide in the Novels of Victor Hugo', p. 196.

79 Louis Proal, *Passion and Criminality: A Legal and Literary Study*, trans. A. R. Allinson (Paris: Charles Carrington, 1901), p. 351.

80 Henry Morselli, *Suicide: An Essay on Comparative Moral Statistics*, translated and abridged by the author (London: C. Kegan Paul, 1881), p. 13.

81 See Gates, *Victorian Suicides*, pp. 119–20.

82 See Deborah Gentry, *The Art of Dying: Suicide in the Works of Kate Chopin and Sylvia Path* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 8–14, on *The House of Mirth*, and ch. 2 on *The Awakening*. See also Kevin Grauke, '"I cannot bear to be hurted anymore": Suicide as Dialectical Ideological Sign in Nineteenth-Century American Realism', in Lucy E. Frank, ed., *Representations of Death in Nineteenth Century US Writing and Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 77–88; and Holly Laird, 'The Death of the Author by Suicide: Fin-de-Siècle Poets and the Construction of Identity', in Joseph Bristow, ed., *The Fin-de-Siècle*

Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), pp. 69–100.

83 See Mary J. Joseph, *Suicide in Henry James's Fiction* (New York: Lang, 1994).

84 Frank R. Giordano Jr., *I'd Have My Life Unbe: Thomas Hardy's Self-Destructive Characters* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1984), p. 43.

85 Paul Wake, *Conrad's Marlow: Narrative and Death in 'Youth', Heart of Darkness, Lord Jim and Chance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 66; Jeffrey Berman, *Joseph Conrad: Writing as Rescue* (New York: Astra Books, 1977), p. 24: 'nothing more fully liberated his creative powers nor more effectively sustained his private and professional life than the subject of self-destruction', Berman comments (p. 25). See also C. B. Cox, 'Joseph Conrad and the Question of Suicide', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library of Manchester* 55 (1973), 285–99; and Anthony Fothergill, '"For to End Yet Again": Suicide in the Stories of Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford', in Keith Carabine and Max Saunders, eds., *Inter-Relations: Conrad, James, Ford and Others* (Lublin: Marie Curie-Skłodowska University, 2003), pp. 179–208.

86 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Diary of a Writer*, in Battin, ed., *Ethics*, p. 546; George Gissing, *New Grubb Street*, ed. John Goode (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 491; Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, pp. xiv, 154.

87 E.C. Spitzka, Review of Henry Morselli, *Suicide, An Essay on Comparative Moral Statistics*, in *Science* 3 (1882), 20.

88 Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 424; Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', p. 311.

89 Proal, *Passion and Criminality*, p. 316 (Proal claims that in France the number of suicides per year had risen from an average of 1,739 between 1827 and 1830 to 6,259 between 1876 and 1880 and to 9,253 in 1895); Reginald Skelton 'Statistics of Suicide', *The Nineteenth Century* 48 (1900), 465. See Johns Stokes, *In the Nineties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), ch. 5, on the so-called suicide craze of the 1890s; and see Barbagli, *Farewell to the World*, pp. 19–20, on this *fin de siècle* (but also perennial) perception of the rise of suicide rates; see pp. 22–3 on the early eighteenth-century and p. 87 on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century perceptions of the same phenomenon. See also John Weaver, *A Sadly Troubled History: The Meanings of Suicide in the Modern Age* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), ch. 1; and see Higonnet, 'Suicide', on degeneracy as an aspect of the feminization of suicide in the nineteenth century and its cultural 'reorientation' towards 'love, passive self-surrender and illness' (106). Olive Anderson notes that between the 1860s and about 1910, the suicide rate did indeed more than double: suicide verdicts rose from about 1,000 in the 1850s to more than 3,000 in the first decade of the twentieth century (*Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, pp. 67, 270).

90 Stjepan G. Meštrović, *The Coming* Fin de Siècle: *An Application of Durkheim's Sociology to Modernity and Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 10; see also Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, pp. 242–7.

91 Forbes Winslow, *The Anatomy of Suicide* (London: Henry Renshaw, 1840), p. 82.
92 Morselli, *Suicide*, p. 363; see pp. 363–71.
93 Skelton, 'Statistics', pp. 465–6.
94 Howard I. Kushner, 'Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity', in John Weaver and David Wright, eds., *Histories of Suicide: International Perspectives on Self-Destruction in the Modern World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. 27; Kushner also cites Tomáš Masaryk, the philosopher, sociologist, and founder of Czechoslovakia, who argues tendentiously, in *Suicide and the Meaning of Civilization* (1881), that 'primitive people showed no suicide tendency at all', while 'civilized peoples, on the other hand, show a very intensive one': for Masaryk, suicide is 'the fruit of progress, of education, of civilization' (quoted on p. 26). See also Maria Teresa Brancaccio et al., 'The Politics of Suicide: Historical Perspectives on Suicidology before Durkheim. An Introduction', *Journal of Social History* 46 (2013), 612–13.
95 John Ordronaux, 'On Suicide', *American Journal of Insanity* 20, no. 4 (April 1864), 387, 393.
96 Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*, trans. G. Simpson (London: Collier Macmillan, 1933), p. 191; *Suicide*, p. 137.
97 Walter Benjamin, 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', in *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 104.
98 See Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 69–70.
99 J. G. Spurzheim, *Observations on the Deranged Manifestations of the Mind, or Insanity* (Boston: Marsh, Capen and Lyon, 1833), pp. 139, 141; see also pp. 139–40 for a list of physiological symptoms typically associated with suicidality.
100 George Man Burrows, *An Inquiry into Certain Errors Relative to Insanity* (London: Thomas and George Underwood, 1820), p. 87.
101 Quoted in Hacking, *The Taming of Chance*, p. 65; see ch. 8, passim, for a discussion of debates in French intellectual and medical circles on suicide as a specific pathology.
102 MacDonald 'The Medicalization of Suicide', pp. 90, 92; Olive Anderson records that 'state of mind unknown' was also a common verdict in mid-nineteenth-century England (*Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, p. 223).
103 Bähr, 'Between "Self-Murder" and "Suicide"', pp. 628–9.
104 Cahn, *Suicide in French Thought*, pp. 5, 304.
105 Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, pp. xiii, xv.
106 Ibid., p.38.
107 Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, p. 242.
108 Quoted in Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, p. 30.
109 Rab Houston, 'The Medicalization of Suicide: Medicine and the Law in Scotland and England, circa 1750–180', in Weaver and Wright, eds., *Histories of Suicide*, p. 93.

110 Roy F. Baumeister, 'Suicide as Escape from Self', *Psychological Review* 97 (1990), 90; Ian Marsh, 'The Uses of History in the Unmaking of Modern Suicide', *Journal of Social History* 46 (2013), 747; see also Marsh, *Suicide*, ch. 8.

111 George Henry Lewes, 'Suicide in Life and Literature', *Westminster Review* 68 (July 1857), 53 (review of Louis Bertrand, *Traité du Suicide* (Paris, 1857)); Lewes argues that 'the treatment of suicide in Literature' contrasts with such a verdict: while 'the juryman always represents suicide as the act of a madman; the poet and novelist always represent it as either the deliberation, or the despair, of one perfectly sane' (ibid.; see also 57, 74–5). On the conventionality of the verdict in the nineteenth century, see McDonald, 'The Medicalization of Suicide', and Georgina Laragy, '"A Peculiar Species of Felony": Suicide, Medicine, and the Law in Victorian Britain and Ireland', *Journal of Social History* 46 (2013), 732–43.

112 Anon, review of A. Brierre de Boismont, *On Suicide and Suicidal Insanity* (Paris, 1856), in *Journal of Psychological Medicine and Mental Pathology* 9 (1856), 450, 445.

113 Marsh, *Suicide: Foucault, History and Truth*, p. 50.

114 Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 138–9.

115 See Hacking, *The Taming of Chance*, pp. 173–9; see also Brancaccio et al., 'The Politics of Suicide', on Henry Morselli's influence on the re-conception of the act as a 'natural outcome of the struggle for survival among civilized people' (614); and see Zohreh Bayatrizi, *Life Sentences: The Modern Ordering of Mortality* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), p. 113.

116 Henry Maudsley, 'Suicide in Simple Melancholy', *Medical Magazine* 1, no. 1 (1892), 55, 50.

117 Charles Mercier, *Sanity and Insanity* (London: Walter Scott, 1890), pp. 350, 352; see also pp. 354–5, for Mercier's Darwinian speculation that forms of self-sacrifice including suicide are a natural function of reproduction; for a late twentieth-century discussion of suicide as a mechanism of natural selection, see Battin, *The Least Worst Death*, pp. 228–9.

118 Leslie Stephen, *The Science of Ethics* (London: Smith, Elder, 1882), p. 392.

119 Durkheim, *Suicide*, p. xxxiii. See Holly A. Laird, 'Between the (Disciplinary) Acts: Modernist Suicidology', *Modernism/modernity* 18 (2012), 529, on Durkheim's project of resisting the explanatory power of both psychology and evolutionary biology.

120 Skelton, 'Statistics', p. 465.

121 Stoff and Mann, 'Suicide Research', p. 2; Stoff and Mann argue that it is now 'well accepted' that a 'multidimensional model comprising overlapping psychosocial, biologic, genetic, psychiatric, and temperament/personality domains' is appropriate for understanding suicide (ibid).

122 Tim Lott, *The Scent of Dried Roses* (1996) (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 74.

123 Hacking, *The Taming of Chance*, p. 64.

124 Jean La Fontaine, 'Explaining Suicide: An Afterword', *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 36 (2012), 409.

125 Anon, 'The Classic Land of Suicide', *Psychological Journal* (1861), quoted in Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, p. 26; see Weaver, *A Sadly Troubled History*, pp. 52–3, on the way that 'statistically grounded argumentation shaped the knowledge structure of suicide studies by the 1850s'.

126 Bayatrizi, *Life Sentences*, p. 93; Weaver, *A Sadly Troubled History*, p. 61. See also Bayatrizi's suggestion that Durkheim 'stands out' with regard to the fact that for him 'the social, the moral, and the private aspects of suicide, as an individual act, are interwoven' (p. 117)

127 Anne Nesbet, 'Suicide as Literary Fact in the 1920s', *Slavic Review* 50 (1991), 827: Nesbet is referring to the Soviet sociologization of suicide, but the comments are also applicable to emerging frameworks in the Western understanding of suicide.

128 Hacking, *The Taming of Chance*, p. 176.

129 Baechler, *Suicides*, p. 6; compare Svetlana Boym's stark assertion that 'It is hardly possible to draw the line between exterior and interior, cultural and individual, reasons for the self-inflicted murder' (*Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 152).

130 Turner, 'Scenographies of Suicide', 262. In fact, commenting on the 'metaphysical' question of free will, Durkheim himself notes that his analysis 'merely adds to physical, chemical, biological and psychological forces, social forces which like these act upon men from without' (*Suicide*, p. 290). In their introduction to a recent special journal issue on the 'ethnographies of suicide', James Staples and Tom Widger similarly argue that there is a critical tension between 'the human universality and cultural specificity of suicide' ('Situating Suicide as an Anthropological Problem: Ethnographic Approaches to Understanding Self-Harm and Self-Inflicted Death', *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 36 (2012), 185); see Michael J. Kral, 'Suicide and the Internalization of Culture: Three Questions', *Transcultural Psychiatry* 35 (1998), 229, on the idea that twentieth-century thinking implicitly 'held strongly to the notion that the ultimate origin of suicide . . . lies within the person'.

131 Margaret Pabst Battin, *Ending Life: Ethics and the Way We Die* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 164; compare Paul Fairfield, *Death: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 55–62 (and ch. 3 passim), on the tension between the 'dominant' medical and sociological accounts of suicide in contemporary discourse and the phenomenological experience of suicidality (suicide as effectively an existential choice made by an individual).

132 Christopher Damien Chung, *'Almost Unnamable': Suicide in the Modernist Novel* (unpublished PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2008), p. 235; de Montherlant is quoted in Minois, *History of Suicide*, p. 323.

133 Maudsley, 'Suicide in Simple Melancholy', 54.

3 A WORLD WITHOUT MEANING

1 Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 75.

2 Holly A. Laird, 'Suicide in D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*: A Modernist Ethics', in Howard J. Booth, ed., *New D. H. Lawrence* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 63 ('death process' is from *Women in Love*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 171, 191; see also pp. 293, 470 for the phrase 'process of death'). Gerald Critch's death bears an uncanny resemblance to that of Hans Castorp in *The Magic Mountain* (1924) (in a chapter called 'Snow'; Gerald's death occurs in 'Snowed Up'): see T. E. Apter, *Thomas Mann: The Devil's Advocate* (London: Macmillan, 1977), ch. 5, on the similarities and differences between the two novelists. Other suicides occur in, for example, Lawrence's early novel *The Trespasser* (1912), in his short story 'The Horse Dealer's Daughter' (1922), and in his poem 'The Ship of Death' (1929).

3 On Robert's ambiguous suicide, see Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 291. Suicide also features prominently in *Eva Trout* (1968) in which Eva's father is a suicide.

4 Maude also points to an unpublished and undated manuscript draft called 'Last Soliloquy' in the Beckett Collection at the University of Reading, in which two actors rehearse what appears to be a suicide scene (*Samuel Beckett and Medicine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), ch. 6).

5 Max Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), vol. I, pp. 145, 65: further references to vol. I are cited in the text as *FMF*.

6 Violet Hunt, *The Flurried Years* (London: Hurst and Blackett, n.d.), pp. 55–6: Hunt claims that she found a bottle melodramatically marked 'POISON' in his jacket and took it away from him, but she also remarks contentiously that 'persons who talk of suicide are the last persons to commit it' (p. 56; see *FMF* 285–6).

7 Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier*, ed. Thomas C. Moser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 1: further references to *The Good Soldier* are cited from this edition as *GS*.

8 Conrad, 'Preface' (1924) to Conrad and F. M. Hueffer, *The Nature of a Crime* (London: Duckworth, 1924), p. 5. The novella was based on Conrad's own suicide attempt in 1878.

9 See Sara Haslam, '*The Rash Act* and *Henry for Hugh*: A Fordian History of Self-Construction (or: Where is [M]other?)', in Joseph Wiesenfarth, ed., *History and Representation in Ford Madox Ford's Writings* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 125–34.

10 See Michael Levenson's comment that 'one remembers Dowell's narrative for its insistent formal dislocations' ('Character in *The Good Soldier', Twentieth Century Literature* 30 (1984), 374); as Levenson also remarks, adhering to Ford's Impressionist principles of narration, Dowell 'disregards fact in favour

of impression, follows the wanderings of memory, ignores chronology, allows unlikely juxtapositions, digresses freely' (380). Levenson comments on what he calls the 'pathology of Impressionism', suggesting that 'what begins as the perceiving self in unusual circumstances can quickly become a perception of the unusual self' and notes that in authors such as Conrad and Faulkner, Impressionism 'serves so frequently to render emotional and moral aberration' (381).

11 Anon, *Saturday Review* (19 June 1915), iv; in Martin Stannard, ed., *The Good Soldier*, 2nd edn (New York: Norton, 2012), p. 249.

12 Eugene Goodheart, 'What Dowell Knew', in Stannard, ed., *The Good Soldier*, p.382.

13 See Rebecca West's comment that the novel 'set the pattern for perhaps half the novels which have been written since' ('Unlucky Eccentric's Private World', *Sunday Telegraph* (17 June 1962), p. 6 (quoted in *FMF* vii)); compare Ann Barr Snitow's comment that Ford was among the first English writers to develop a 'tone of voice' ('subjective, ironic, indirect, often ludicrous or comic') that has 'become the common property of all writers in the twentieth century' (*Ford Madox Ford and the Voice of Uncertainty* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), p. 1); see also her comments on *The Good Soldier* as a 'masterpiece of modernism' in its 'despair over cultural collapse, its enforced subjectivity, its comic ironies tempered by an ultimate, desperate romanticism' (p. 13), and on the novel as 'a precocious exploration of themes endemic to much of the modernist writing that was to follow' (p. 186).

14 David Bradshaw, ed., Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier* (London: Penguin, 2002), 'Introduction', p. vii; Snitow, *Ford Madox Ford and the Voice of Uncertainty*, p. 2. As Saunders puts it, the novel 'foregrounds the difficulty of knowing and understanding' through 'chronological fragmentation' and 'narrative and semantic intricacy' (*FMF* 407); see also Stannard's comment that Ford's revisions to the manuscript shift the focus of the novel from 'what is known to what is unknown' in characterological, narratological, and cultural-symbolic terms (Stannard, ed., *The Good Soldier*, p. 194). David Eggenschwiler, however, argues that, rather than being a novel concerned with epistemological questions as such, it is more concerned with investigating 'the teller's art in manipulating the reader' ('Very like a Whale: The Comical-Tragical Illusions of *The Good Soldier*', *Genre* 12 (1979), 408). See Ford's comment in his 1935 essay 'Techniques' on the 'convention' that he and Conrad developed in which the omniscient narrator (or the 'almost omnipotent' 'official Author', as Ford calls the figure) may be considered to know 'almost everything that there is to know' and not to have 'prejudices', by contrast with the narrator who, as a character in the novel, 'must be limited by probability as to what he can know of the affair that he is adumbrating' but who 'may indulge in any prejudices or wrongheadednesses and any likings or dislikings' ('Techniques', in Stannard, ed., *The Good Soldier*, p. 313).

15 Paul B. Armstrong, *The Challenge of Bewilderment: Understanding and Representation in James, Conrad, and Ford* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 191; Levenson, 'Character in *The Good Soldier*', 379. In his illuminating reading

of the novel, Armstrong argues that it is as much an example of 'interpretive dilemmas' as it is *about* them, but nevertheless tends to read Dowell as moving towards an understanding, showing himself towards the end of the novel 'much more able to focus his attention and organize events than he was at the start'; 'Dowell's awakening itself suggests that there is a difference for Ford between right and wrong interpretations', Armstrong comments (pp. 197, 201; see also 198). Levenson, too, allows for a kind of resolution when he comments that while Dowell may not *know*, he nevertheless *decides* 'and in so deciding, he gives a picture of morality in its nascent state, founded not on inherited norms but on original judgments of value' (386). See also Samuel Hynes's comment: 'The problem that the novel sets is the problem of knowledge, and specifically knowledge of the human heart'; it is a novel about 'an irresolvable pluralism of truths' that exists in 'a world that remains essentially dark' ('The Epistemology of *The Good Soldier*', *Sewanee Review* 69 (1961), 234, 231).

16 Armstrong, *The Challenge of Bewilderment*, p. 209; Sara Haslam, *Fragmenting Modernism: Ford Madox Ford, the Novel and the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 11.

17 Frank Kermode, 'Recognition and Deception', in Stannard, ed., *The Good Soldier*, p. 351.

18 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981), pp. 230–43. As Hynes points out, there is in fact no epistemological 'norm' through which to view the events described other than the deeply flawed vision of Dowell: his 'fallibility *is* the norm' in a novel in which the question 'How can we know what is true' is just 'what the novel is about' ('The Epistemology of *The Good Soldier*', 228); the action of the novel, according to Hynes, is 'Dowell's struggle to understand' (231); see also Goodheart, 'What Dowell Knew', p. 384.

19 The manuscript has two or three similarly decisive expressions of narratorial doubt that were cut from the final book: 'I have asked novelists about these things, but they don't seem to be able to tell you much . . . I don't know that I particularly want to write a novel'; 'I don't know how to tell this story'; 'I can't for the life of me make up my mind how to tell this part' (Stannard, ed., *The Good Soldier*, pp. 210, 212).

20 Armstrong, *The Challenge of Bewilderment*, p. 213.

21 See Stannard, ed., *The Good Soldier*, p.187.

22 The echo is perhaps even more clearly marked in Dowell's earlier comment on Florence 'clearing up one of the dark places of the earth' (*GS* 48): Joseph see Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough, 3rd edn. (New York: Norton, 1988), p. 9: '"And this also", said Marlow suddenly, "has been one of the dark places of the earth"'. On *The Good Soldier* and the influence of Conrad's Marlow, see Thomas C. Moser, 'Conrad and *The Good Soldier*', in Richard A. Cassell, ed., *Critical Essays on Ford Madox Ford* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987), pp. 58–61.

23 Lawrence Thornton, 'Escaping the Impasse: Criticism and the Mitosis of *The Good Soldier*', in Cassell, ed., *Critical Essays on Ford Madox Ford*, p. 64.
24 See Ford's comment in his 1914 essay 'On Impressionism' on the attempt to 'capture' and to 'hold' the interest of the kind of reader who has a 'virgin openness of mind' by, amongst other things, 'passages suggesting the sudden and brutal shock of suicide' ('On Impressionism', in Stannard, ed., *The Good Soldier*, pp. 287–8).
25 Bradshaw, 'Introduction', p. xxxiii.
26 In *The Rash Act*, the narrator opines that suicide is 'an act of despair' and 'still more' a 'confession of ineffectualness' and that while 'resolution' was 'the note' of the nineteenth century, 'mental confusion' marked the twentieth century (Ford Madox Ford, *The Rash Act: A Novel* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1982), p. 32).
27 Hynes, 'The Epistemology of *The Good Soldier*', 227: Hynes also includes Maisie Maiden's death in this category, although by contrast with the suicides, her death is told in a relatively conventional and almost purely chronological way (albeit from Leonora's partial perspective) over three pages, as the culmination of Part I of the novel (*GS* 85–8).
28 Dewey Ganzel refers to 'the fastidious and inconsequential description of the penknife', which gets the reference exactly wrong by my reading ('What the Letter Said: Fact and Inference in *The Good Soldier*', *Journal of Modern Literature* 11 (1984), 289).
29 On the moral imperative with regard to complicity in another's suicide, see *The Rash Act*, p. 147: 'You can't let a man commit suicide. This is perhaps the only thing you actually cannot do. It is a sin to commit suicide. If you connive at it it is doubly a sin!'
30 As critics have noted, 4 August is also a proleptic and metatextual marker of the day that the First World War will begin in 1914.
31 The cure becomes, or is, the poison, in an almost perfect example of the pharmakon. It is no doubt significant that William Martindale, the father of Ford's first wife, committed suicide by drinking prussic acid: see *FMF* 145.
32 See Frank Kermode's comment from 1974: 'Nobody has yet discovered in *The Good Soldier* a hermeneutic series that ends in a discovered truth' ('Recognition and Deception', p. 353). There are, of course, accounts of what the story is hiding – for example, both Dewey Ganzel and Max Saunders independently argue for a reading of the novel as ultimately resolving around the (non-)revelation that Nancy is Edward's daughter (see Ganzel 'What the Letter Said', 277–90; *FMF* 420–7); in a somewhat contentious reading, Roger Poole has even suggested that Dowell's confusion is a veil for the fact that he is a murderer (Roger Poole, 'The Unknown Ford Madox Ford', *Ford Madox Ford's Modernity*, ed. Robert Hampson and Max Saunders (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), pp. 117–36).
33 Levenson, 'Character in *The Good Soldier*', 383.
34 Ibid., 384.
35 Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 36.

36 See Karen A. Hoffmann's comment that in his desire for Nancy, Edward's 'internal conflict' between the incest taboo and his compulsively imperialistic 'quest for possessing ever more women' catastrophically collides ('"Am I no better than a eunuch?": Narrating Masculinity and Empire in Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*', *Journal of Modern Literature* 27 (2004), 38).

37 See, Vincent J. Cheng, 'Religious Differences in *The Good Soldier*: The "Protest" Scene', *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature*, 37 (1985), 239, on the 'religious issue' as 'ubiquitous': 'Dowell seems to qualify everyone and everything as either Romantic Catholic or Protestant', although (or because) he is a Quaker. It is, of course, deeply ironic that it is the louche, dishonest, and ultimately suicidal Florence who rehearses an utterly self-deceiving categorization, when she informs Edward that he and she are 'honest, sober, industrious, provident, and clean-lived', because they are Protestant and unlike Catholics, and 'particularly the Irish' (such as Leonora) (*GS* 53). I have found no evidence that Ford specifically read Durkheim's *Suicide* (first published in German in 1897), nor that he had read Max Weber's *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (first published in German in 1905), but since he read German he may have done so, and there are distinct echoes of Durkheim's book in *The Good Soldier*: in addition to the major shared theme of the opposition of Protestant to Catholic social and cultural sensibilities, the discussion of the inexplicable 'suicidal craze' on the troop ship (*GS* 199–200), for example, chimes with Durkheim's comment that 'In the tropics men are often seen to throw themselves abruptly into the ocean under the direct rays of the sun' (Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 59). Ford's engagement with the discourse and the emerging discipline of sociology in both his cultural writings and his novels is well established (his sociological documentary trilogy *England and the English* (1905–7) famously includes the germ of the pivotal scene of *The Good Soldier* – and arguably the whole novel – in the moment in which Dowell accompanies Edward as he drives Florence to the station to send her away to her father in India). On Ford as a sociological writer, see John Attridge, 'Steadily and Whole: Ford Madox Ford and Modernist Sociology', *Modernism/Modernity* 15 (2008), 297–315; and see Holly A. Laird's claim in 'Between the (Disciplinary) Acts: Modernist Suicidology', *Modernism/modernity* 18 (2012), 535–6, that literature 'effectively seized the field of sociology generally from the social sciences' in the early twentieth century.

38 On the 'chasm' between psychoanalysis and sociology, see Lynn Chancer and John Andrews, eds., *The Unhappy Divorce of Sociology and Psychoanalysis: Diverse Perspectives on the Psychosocial* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) ('chasm' is from Jeffrey C. Alexander, 'Preface', p.xiii).

39 Like 'good', the word 'normal' is used, consciously and conspicuously, in ways that unground its sense: Edward too, is referred to as 'normal', in fact, on a number of occasions: 'He was just a normal man . . . the outline of Edward's life was an outline perfectly normal' (*GS* 178); 'Edward was the normal man' (*GS* 274).

40 See Snitow's comment that 'Neither Edward's death nor Dowell's understanding of it can redeem the permanent loss of rectitude symbolized by Leonora's final social ascendancy' (*Ford Madox Ford and the Voice of Uncertainty*, p. 182).
41 Armstrong, *The Challenge of Bewilderment*, p. 208. See also Kenneth Womack's comment that for Dowell 'the text of the novel functions as a form of narrative therapy, as the means via which he comes to terms with the suicides' of Florence and Edward, the death of Maisie Maidan, and Nancy's madness: he can thereby 'comprehend . . . the genuine text of his own life' ('"It is all a darkness": Death, Narrative Therapy, and Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*', *Papers on Language and Literature* 38 (2002), 316).
42 Hynes, 'The Epistemology of *The Good Soldier*', 235.
43 Nesbet, 'Suicide as Literary Fact in the 1920s', *Slavic Review* 50 (1991), 835.
44 This is the gist of Richard A. Hood's reading of *The Good Soldier* as 'a novel which is ultimately about itself in the process of becoming a novel', one that 'demonstrates its own epistemological polymorphy' ('"Constant Reduction": Modernism and the Narrative Structure of *The Good Soldier*', *Journal of Modern Literature* 14 (1988), 463).
45 Stannard, ed., *The Good Soldier*, 'Introduction, p.xiv.

4 'THE LOVE THAT KILLS'

1 Richard Aldington, 'The Influence of Mr. James Joyce', *English Review* 149 (April 1921), 337; Joyce, quoted in Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, revised edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 457.
2 Frederick Karl, *Modern and Modernism: The Sovereignty of the Artist, 1885–1925* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), p. 157. There are a small number of exceptions to this exclusion of suicide as a theme in the critical reception. For a consideration of suicide in 'A Painful Case' in particular, see Randy Malamud, 'Durkheimian Sensibilities in Joyce: Anomie and the Social Suicide', in Clive Hart et al., eds., *Images of Joyce*, vol. 1 (Gerards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1998), pp. 127–37 (see p. 136n for a list of the occasions on which suicide had a direct impact on Joyce's life); see also Ellmann, *James Joyce*, pp. 175, 585. In *Suicide: A Social and Historical Study* (London: Peter Davies, 1938), ch. 8 ('Mr Bloom's Father'), the historian Henry Romilly Fedden has an illuminating chapter on the assumptions surrounding suicide in early twentieth-century Ireland in relation to the death of Rudolph Bloom.
3 James Joyce, *Exiles*, in J. C. C. Mays, ed., *Poems and Exiles* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 147.
4 Joyce, *Poems and Shorter Writings*, ed. Richard Ellmann, et al. (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), pp. 232–3.
5 While different versions of the Tristan and Iseult myth vary significantly with respect to whether or not suicide occurs, given the influence of Richard Wagner on Joyce it is notable that, as John Louis DiGaetani comments, *Tristan und Isdolde* (1865) is Wagner's 'most suicidal opera' and 'most reflects Wagner's own depressive suicidal thoughts' (*Wagner and Suicide* (Jefferson: McFarland and

Co, 2003), p. 73). As DiGaetani comments, suicide 'dominates the opera in which each act ends with a suicide attempt by Tristan, with the final attempt being successful', while for her part, Isolde 'exemplifies a suicidal personality' (pp. 76, 80). For a reading of *Tristan und Isdolde* in terms of the death drive, see Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, 'Death Drive: Eros and Thanatos in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*', *Cambridge Open Journal* 11 (1999), 267–93. Joyce's familiarity with the opera is evinced in a letter to Harriet Shaw from March 1922, when he recalls 'meditatively whistling bits of *Tristan and Isolde*' (*The Letters of James Joyce*, ed. Stuart Gilbert and Richard Ellmann, 3 vols. (London: Faber and Faber, 1957, 1966), vol. 1, p. 183 (hereafter cited as *Letters* in the text). On Wagner's influence on Joyce, see Timothy P. Martin, 'Joyce, Wagner, and the Wandering Jew', *Comparative Literature* 42 (1990), 49–72: Martin notes that Joyce bought books by or about Wagner from as early as 1898 and that 'only Shakespeare and Ibsen occupied more space on Joyce's shelves' (51). See also Martin, *Joyce and Wagner: A Study of Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

6 Sara Danius, 'Joyce's Scissors: Modernism and the Dissolution of the Event', *New Literary History* 39 (2008), 989–1016; see also Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), esp. ch. 1, on the quotidian in modernist writing.

7 Galen Strawson, 'Against Narrativity', ch. 7 in *Real Materialism and Other Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2008), pp. 109–208; see also ch. 8, 'Episodic Ethics' (pp. 209–32). For challenges to Strawson's opposition between 'diachronic' and 'episodic' versions of self-representation, see James L. Battersby, 'Narrativity, Self, and Self-Representation', *Narrative* 14 (2006), 27–44, and Paul John Eakin, 'Narrative Identity and Narrative Imperialism: A Response to Galen Strawson and James Phelan', *Narrative* 14 (2006), 180–7.

8 See Ellmann, *James Joyce*, p. 593: the volume, published in Paris by Shakespeare and Company in July 1927, was priced at one shilling or twelve francs. Ironically, perhaps, the book sold badly, and Joyce complained to Harriet Weaver in August 1927 that whereas Picasso can command '20,000 or 30,000 francs for a few hours' work', his own work is 'not worth a penny a line' (*Letters* 1.258).

9 James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 106: this edition is hereafter cited in the text as *U*. See also Ellmann, *James Joyce*, p. 517, on Joyce's superstition and the number 13; and see Morrill Cody's memories of Joyce's superstitions from the 1920s, in E. H. Mikhail, ed., *James Joyce: Interviews and Recollections* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p. 92.

10 Joyce, *Poems and Shorter Writings*, p. 51. The poem's title was changed in 1919 from 'Cabra' to 'Ruminants', and only subsequently to 'Tilly'.

11 Ellmann, *James Joyce*, p. 136.

12 Joyce, *Poems and Shorter Writings*, p. 254.

13 As I argue later in the chapter, one of the things that happened in the years between the two versions of the poem was an explicit articulation of suicidality by Joyce's father. In fact, John Wyse Jackson and Peter Costello even argue that the *first* version of 'Tilly' – 'Cabra' (from late 1903) – is about Joyce's father rather than about the death of his mother, and that this point is lost to 'anyone

ignorant of the Irish beef trade at the turn of the century'; they argue that, in its later form its classical allusions give the poem 'an entirely new significance' (*John Stanislaus Joyce: The Voluminous Life and Genius of James Joyce's Father* (London: Fourth Estate, 1997), pp. 266–7).

14 See Robert Scholes, 'James Joyce, Irish Poet', *James Joyce Quarterly* 2 (1965), 263: Scholes identifies similar bleeding, speaking trees in Virgil, Ovid, and Spenser and argues that Joyce's 'Tilly' develops the traditional theme of betrayal and exile (263–4); see also John T. Shawcross, '"Tilly" and Dante', *James Joyce Quarterly* 7 (1969), 61–4; and see Mary T. Reynolds, *Joyce and Dante: The Shaping Imagination* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 151–4, who argues that a 'similar self-identification, not with the suicidal ending but with the story of undeserved betrayal and despair that led to the suicidal impulse, must have been in Joyce's mind when he made the final revision of his poem, with its echo of Dante's episode' (154).

15 *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume 1: Inferno*, trans. Robert M. Durling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 199–201 (Canto 13, ll.28–34).

16 Joyce was an 'exile' from Ireland from 1905 onwards, of course, and saw himself as such: 'If the Irish programme did not insist on the Irish language I suppose I could call myself a nationalist', he writes to Stanislaus in November 1906, but as it is, 'I am content to recognise myself an exile: and, prophetically, a repudiated one' (*Letters* 2.187).

17 See Reynolds, *Joyce and Dante*, p. 154; and see Chester G. Anderson's comment that the poem is about 'the compulsion of self-sacrifice, the desire to brave danger and to bleed' ('James Joyce's "Tilly"', *PMLA* 73 (1958), 298).

18 For Mary Reynolds, 'Tilly' is 'a more radical version of the theme of exile, voluntary or involuntary, as the artist's fated lot' (*Joyce and Dante*, p. 154), while for Thomas Shawcross, the final stanza even indicates that the poet has 'committed a form of suicide by his rejection of the commonplace and his country'. For Shawcross, indeed, 'Tilly' foreshadows the aesthetic theories of Stephen Dedalus in *Portrait*, which involve self-destruction as a means of achieving immortality (Shawcross, '"Tilly" and Dante', p. 62).

19 James Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, ed. Theodore Spencer (New York: New Directions, 1944), pp. 122–3: this edition is hereafter cited as *SH* in the text. Joyce's 'great passion', as his brother Stanislaus puts it in his *Dublin Diary*, 'is a fierce scorn of what he calls the "rabblement" – a tiger-like insatiable hatred' (*The Complete Dublin Diary of Stanislaus Joyce*, ed. George H. Healey (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), p. 3 (entry for '1903')).

20 In a recent report on 'Training in Suicide Prevention Skills" in *Emergency Services Ireland Magazine* 35 (2010), 37, Colin Murray, a member of the Howth Coast Guard, is reported as saying, 'Attempted suicide is a problem we have always had in Howth'. As it happens, falling might be linked to Joyce's Jesuit education and training, to the very structures of thought into which he is inducted as a child since, as Cóilín Owens points out, there is an etymological link between falling and casuistry, a key principle of Jesuit teaching (*James Joyce's Painful Case* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008), p. 96ff).

21 It is significant that, according to Morrill Cody, Joyce had 'a great fear' of, amongst other things, loud noises, thunderstorms, 'heights and all physical phenomena of an unusual character' (Mikhail, ed., *Interviews and Recollections*, p. 92). On falling (as well as drowning and death by overdose) as often ambiguous or indecipherable acts or events, see Kay Redfield Jamison, *Night Falls Fast: Understanding Suicide* (London: Picador, 2000), pp. 29–30.

22 See Matthew 4.6 and Luke 4.9 in both the King James and the Catholic Douay-Rheims Bible.

23 It is perhaps significant that Flaubert's *La tentation de Saint Antoine* (1872), which includes suicide as one of its temptations, was 'formative' for Joyce according to Scarlett Baron (*Strandentwining Cable: Joyce, Flaubert, and Intertextuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 134; see also pp. 133–77, passim).

24 See Martin Scofield, *The Ghosts of Hamlet: The Play and Modern Writers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), ch. 5: 'Joyce's *Ulysses* is so full of allusions to *Hamlet*, and echoes of its language, that Joyce would seem to be the foremost exemplar of the creative use of the play in modern literature' (59); see also Alexander Welsh, *Hamlet in His Modern Guises* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 163–70, on Stephen as the 'Hamlet figure' in the novel (163). Welsh quotes one critic who counted ninety-one allusions to *Hamlet* in *Ulysses* (forty-two by Stephen himself) (ibid.).

25 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 208. For a recent novel that might be said to enact the suicidal death of its author, see Nicholas Royle, *An English Guide to Birdwatching* (2017).

26 Jeri Johnson notes the echo, for example, in *Portrait*, p. 287n.

27 Honoré de Balzac, *Le Médecin de campagne*, ed. Pierre Barbéris (Paris: Éditions Garnier Frère, 1976), p. 233 (my translation).

28 Ibid., pp. 234–5.

29 Ibid., p. 236. Balzac himself read the inscription on a visit to the Grand Chartreuse: see Graham Robb, *Balzac: A Biography* (London: Picador, 1994), p. 217.

30 Balzac, *Le Médecin de campagne*, p. 236.

31 Ibid., p. 237.

32 The importance of the motto to Balzac is suggested by the fact that the epigraph to the novel – 'Aux cœurs blesses, l'ombre et le silence' (For wounded hearts, shadow and silence) – is a quotation from the doctor's final letter to Evelina and is a phrase that he repeats as he recounts his adoption of the Carthusian monk's motto.

33 Balzac, *A Harlot High and Low*, trans. Rayner Heppenstall (London: Penguin, 1970), p. 25.

34 Joyce, *Portrait*, p. 181. See Baron, *Strandentwining Cable*, pp. 90–100, on Flaubert's influence on Stephen's theory.

35 See Malamud, 'Durkheimian Sensibilities', p. 132: 'Joyce implies that suicide is the modernist patrimony, the condition that haunts' the protagonists of *Ulysses*.

See also Karl, *Modern and Modernism*, on the idea that Durkheim's study of suicide 'introduced factors that curiously equate the early development of Modernism with modern suicide' and that his work 'coincides with the advent of a literature of suicide'; for Karl, indeed, the avant garde itself has 'a kind of suicidal charge' (pp. 40, 157). For Malamud, Joyce 'presents an anatomy' of the 'collective inclinations' towards suicide in certain 'dysfunctional', anomic societies that Durkheim identifies (p. 135). It is significant, in this regard, that, as Don Gifford has pointed out, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* displays 'striking parallels' with the narrative structure of Henrik Ibsen's *Brand* (1867), in which the eponymous hero, prophetic, iconoclastic, and idealistic in turn, ends up effectively killing himself on a Norwegian mountain (*Joyce Annotated: Notes for 'Dubliners' and 'A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man'*, 2nd edn. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 129–300).

36 Hugh Kenner, *Dublin's Joyce* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1956), p. 59; Goldberg is quoted in Michael West and William Hendricks, 'The Genesis and Significance of Joyce's Irony in "A Painful Case"', *ELH* 44 (1977), 722; as West and Hendricks comment, 'Perhaps the central paradox of "A Painful Case" is that Joyce's criticism of Duffy is too evidently in Duffy's own spirit'; see also Owens's argument that 'uniquely among the stories of *Dubliners*', this one 'anticipates the project that was to become *Ulysses*' (*James Joyce's Painful Case*, p. 3).

37 On the influence of *Anna Karenina*, see Margot Norris, 'Shocking the Reader in James Joyce's "A Painful Case"', *James Joyce Quarterly* 37 (1999–2000), 68–9; and Paul Delany and Dorothy E. Young, 'Turgenev and the Genesis of "A Painful Case"', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 20 (1974), 219. Delany and Young argue that the story is a reworking of Ivan Turgenev's 'Clara Militch' (1882), which also features the suicide of a woman spurned by an intellectually superior individual; see also West and Hendricks, 'The Genesis and Significance of Joyce's Irony', 715–16. John Wyse Jackson and Bernard McGinley suggest that, as well as having parallels with *Anna Karenina*, Joyce's story can be seen as 'an ironic reprise' of another canonical suicide novel, *Madame Bovary* (idem., eds., *James Joyce's 'Dubliners'* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1993), p. 104). Owens argues that the story is also indebted to and reflects in its theme Gluck's *Orpheo et Euridice* (an opera that was performed in Dublin in April 1902 when Stanislaus Joyce was in the audience), which features the effective suicides of both Euridice and Orpheus (*James Joyce's Painful Case*, pp. 42–4), and that Guy de Maupassant's 'A Little Walk', a story that features the suicide of a bookkeeper and that Joyce read in July 1905, was another influence. Owens also links the story with Joyce's interest in the *Liebestod* tradition (in particular in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*) and in the idea of 'love that is at once destructive and redemptive' and of 'redemption in death' (p. 144; see pp. 144–5); see also ch. 6 on a number of suicide narratives (Turgenev's 'Clara Militch', Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Hauptman's *Michael Kramer*) as influential for Joyce's story.

38 Owens, *James Joyce's Painful Case*, p. 55.

39 For queer readings of Duffy, see Roberta Jackson, 'The Open Closet in *Dubliners*: James Duffy's Painful Case', *James Joyce Quarterly* 37 (1999–2000), 83–97, and Norris, 'Shocking the Reader'. Joyce's translation of *Michael Kramer* is now lost, but see *Letters* 1.398 for his assertion to Ezra Pound in 1937 that he had made a translation of the play as a 'boy in Dublin'; Jill Perkins also cites another letter, from 1938, in which Joyce tells Hauptmann himself that he translated the play (*Joyce and Hauptmann, 'Before Sunrise': James Joyce's Translation, with an Introduction and Notes* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1978), pp. 10–11 and p. 14n.7). On the autobiographical aspects of 'A Painful Case', see Marvin Magalaner, 'Joyce, Nietzsche, and Hauptmann in James Joyce's "A Painful Case"' *PMLA* 68 (1953), 95–102; see also Douglad McMillan, 'Influences of Gerhart Hauptmann in Joyce's *Ulysses*', *James Joyce Quarterly* 4 (1967), 118.

40 James Joyce, *Dubliners*, ed. Terence Brown (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 104, 105 (hereafter cited in the text as *D*). See Malamud, 'Durkheimian Sensibilities', p. 127 and passim.

41 The issue of how and why Mrs Sinico dies is a central question in the story's reception. Don Gifford refers to Mrs Sinico's death as a 'near-suicide occasioned by her alcoholism' (*Joyce Annotated: Notes for James Joyce's 'Ulysses'*, 2nd edn. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 125): in fact, the story seems to imply that the verdict of 'accidental' death (see *D* 88, and *U* 648) is a standard judicial evasion of the verdict of suicide. West and Hendricks argue that since Mrs Sinico's death occurs four years after her rejection by Duffy, blaming him for it is a 'curious misconception' ('The Genesis and Significance of Joyce's Irony', 701). On this question, see also Mary Lowe-Evans, 'Who Killed Mrs Sinico?', *Studies in Short Fiction* 32 (1995), 395–402; and David G. Wright, 'The Secret Life of Leopold Bloom and Emily Sinico', *James Joyce Quarterly* 37 (1999–2000), 99–112. In 'Power Play: Games in Joyce's Dubliners', *Studies in Short Fiction* 32 (1995), 323, Mamta Chaudhry-Fryer draws a parallel with Conrad's 'roughly contemporary' *The Secret Agent*, in which Ossipon is informed of the suicide of a woman he has spurned via a newspaper. For a reading of Emily Sinico's suicide in 'A Painful Case' through Freud's theory of melancholia, see Nouri Gana, 'The Vicissitudes of Melancholia in Freud and Joyce', *James Joyce Quarterly* 44 (2006), 103–9.

42 Jackson and McGinley cite as a source for Joyce's story a Dublin newspaper account of the death of an actress, published 16 November 1903, which ends with the phrase, 'no blame could be attached to anyone' (*Dubliners*, p. 101). As Stephen Donovan points out, it is in fact *only* Duffy who is likely to suspect that Mrs Sinico's fall is suicide, since only he is aware of the motive for such an act ('Dear Men's News: Joyce's "A Painful Case" and the Modern Press', *Journal of Modern Literature* 24 (2000), 43–4).

43 See Johnson, ed., *Dubliners*, p. 242 (note to 83.3–6).

44 Randy Malamud argues that Duffy is 'virtually a suicide' and that he is a 'figurative suicide,' but that he 'cannot literally take even that final decisive step', making Mrs Sinico 'stand in for him' by driving her to suicide 'as a sacrifice for himself' ('Durkheimian Sensibilities', pp. 131–2). In fact, Malamud argues that Durkheim's 'anomie' characterizes the individuals and the condition of

Dublin in *Dubliners* more generally, including Lenehan and Farrington, who suffer from anomie, and Eveline, who is another 'figurative suicide' in being unable to act (p. 134). Compare Donovan, 'Dead Men's News', p. 95, for a similar analysis of Duffy as suicidal; Owens suggests that Duffy can be read as a suicidal version of Orpheus (*James Joyce's Painful Case*, p. 43).

45 The 1922 text gives 10 October, a typo for 17 (see Hans Walter Gabler, et al., *Ulysses: A Critical and Synoptic Edition* (New York: Garland, 1984), vol. 3, p. 1569 (l.1454)).

46 So far as I am aware, no critic has made the link between the phrase in *Ulysses* and Wills's novel. W. G. Wills was distantly related to Oscar Wilde and had considerable theatrical success in London in the 1870s and 1880s. That Joyce was aware of Wills's work and that he may have read *The Love that Kills*, is suggested by the fact that *Finnegans Wake* repeatedly alludes to Wills's last play, *A Royal Divorce*, and that Wills's song 'I'll Sing Thee Songs of Araby' is an important source for the *Dubliners* story 'Araby': see Ronald McHugh, *Annotations to Finnegans Wake*, 4th edn. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), pp. 19, 32, 243, 260, 315, 365, 372, 388, 423, 455; and Heyward Ehrlich '"Araby" in Context: The "Splendid Bazaar", Irish Orientalism, and James Clarence Mangan', *James Joyce Quarterly* 35 (1998), 321.

47 G. W. Wills, *The Love that Kills: A Novel in Three Volumes* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1867), vol. 2, p. 225.

48 In a long, troubled letter to his brother Stanislaus from July 1905, Joyce talks about his difficulties with Nora. He concedes that despite everything sometimes she is 'very happy and cheerful' and says that although he is becoming 'less and less romantic', he does not 'desire any such ending for our love-affair as a douche in the Serpentine' (*Letters* 2.96) – an allusion that Richard Ellmann traces to Harriet Shelley's suicide in 1816 (ibid., n.2). At the same time, Joyce goes on, 'I want to avoid as far as humanly possible any such apparition in our lives as that abominable spectre which Aunt Josephine calls "mutual tolerance"' (*Letters* 2.96). There seems to be an opposition here between *Liebestod* on the one hand and the forbidding prospect of marital compromise on the other, with a fear that there is nothing in between.

49 James Joyce, 'Giacomo Joyce', in *Poems and Shorter Writings*, p. 234.

50 Ibid.

51 Ellmann, *James Joyce*, p. 250.

52 Significantly, the original of Michael Furey, Nora Barnacle's young lover Michael Bodkin, bears a name that chimes with Hamlet's idea of making his 'quietus' with a 'bare bodkin' in his suicide speech (*Hamlet* 3.i.74–5); Brenda Maddox points out that Furey was also based on another Michael, Michael Feeney, with whom Nora had a relationship and who also died young (at the age of sixteen, in 1897) (*Nora: A Biography of Nora Joyce* (London: Hamilton, 1988), pp. 25–7). Michael Furey's death also seems to owe much to Hardy's Jude, whose final visit to plead with Sue to return to him results in him getting wet through in the freezing rain: 'You've done for yourself by this', Arabella tells him when he returns from the meeting, 'I don't know whether you know it':

> 'Of course I do. I meant to do for myself'.
> 'What – to commit suicide?'
> 'Certainly'.
> 'Well, I'm blessed! Kill yourself for a woman'.
> '. . . I made up my mind that a man confined to his room by inflammation of the lungs, a fellow who had only two wishes left in the world, to see a particular woman, and then to die, could neatly accomplish those two wishes at one stroke by taking this journey in the rain'.

(Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 494–5).

53 See William Wordsworth, 'Resolution and Independence', lines 43–4, in Stephen Gill, ed., *The Oxford Authors William Wordsworth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 262.

54 Richard Ellmann's resistance to suicide interpretation is indicative of the critical elision of this important dimension of Joyce's work: Ellmann concedes that Gabriel 'no longer possesses himself' and that 'not to possess oneself is in a way a kind of death'. He suggests that 'to some extent' Gabriel, like Michael Furey, is 'dying' for Gretta, and that conventionally 'journeys westwards are towards death'. But he argues that in this story the West has a special significance as 'the primitive, untutored, impulsive country from which Gabriel had felt himself alienated before' (*James Joyce*, p. 249): in other words, Ellmann again raises suicide as a possibility, but then again side-steps it. Some critics do recognize a kind of death wish in Gabriel at the end of 'The Dead', but do not go so far as to suggest a mimetic-suicidal impulse: see, for example, Nouri Gana, 'The Poetics of Mourning: The Tropologic of Prosopopoeia in Joyce's "The Dead"', *American Imago* 60 (2003), 17, on Gabriel as recreating/vicariously living through Furey's death, and 15–17 on Gabriel 'automourning' his prospectively dead self; and see Gerard Quinn, 'Joyce and Tenebrae: The Ironic Passion and Death of Gabriel Conroy', *James Joyce Quarterly* 37 (1999–2000), 163, on Gabriel as metaphorically dead at the end of the story.

55 This may be an autobiographical anxiety: in a letter to Stanislaus of August 1906, Joyce asks if his brother can recommend 'a cure for dreaming'. 'I am troubled every night by horrible and terrifying dreams', he says, 'death, corpses, assassinations in which I take an unpleasantly prominent part' (*Letters* 2.151).

56 Neil R. Davison, *James Joyce, 'Ulysses', and the Construction of Jewish Identity: Culture, Biography, and 'the Jew' in Modernist Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 155.

57 Ibid., p. 168.

58 Quoted in ibid., p. 169; *Letters*, 1.268. Joyce would certainly not have picked this up from Émile Durkheim, who argues that 'the aptitude of Jews for suicide is always less than that of Protestants' and indeed that Judaism has 'the fewest suicides of all' faiths (*Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 109–10; see also pp. 122–5).

59 Joyce, 'Giacomo Joyce', pp. 232–3.

60 See Martin Scofield's perhaps somewhat questionable assertion that Bloom is 'blessedly free from morbid scruples and Hamlet's self-destructiveness' and

that 'When he talks of a sailor making a quietus "with a bare bodkin" it is characteristic that *he* is not thinking of suicide' (*The Ghosts of Hamlet: The Play and Modern Writers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 70).

61 See Davison's suggestion that the suicide of Leopold's father, Rudolph Bloom, plays a 'pivotal role' in the novel and that the death of his father 'continually haunts Bloom' (*James Joyce, 'Ulysses' and the Construction of Jewish Identity*, p. 168). Davison is one of the few critics to have acknowledged this fact about the novel, but he does little to elaborate on this key insight.

62 See Kerry Powell, *Women and Victorian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 52–4: Sarah Bernhardt was amongst the most famous of the female Hamlets, and Bandmann-Palmer apparently played the role as many as a thousand times (p. 52).

63 Rudolph died when Bloom was twenty years old; the anniversary of his suicide, 27 June, is looming.

64 In 'Lotus Eaters' (*U* 73), 'Hades' (*U* 87, 90, 93, 106, 110), 'Circe' (*U* 416, 483), 'Ithaca' (*U* 637, 648, 675–7).

65 Two factors might be seen to modify such an estimate: on the one hand, such thoughts are highly likely to have been much more prominent in the days, weeks, months. and even years immediately following the suicide, which suggests that this may be an underestimate for the total number of occasions on which such thoughts have occurred to Bloom; on the other hand, 16 June 1904 may be considered to be atypical in that Bloom attends a funeral, at which he is reminded of his father's suicide on five separate occasions, suggesting that this may be an overestimate. On the latter point, however, even if one were to disregard all five occasions on which Bloom thinks of his father's suicide in the 'Hades' episode, he still thinks of it on at least six occasions (giving a total of about 40,000 unique paternal suicide thoughts since 1886). These figures take no account of references by Bloom to others' suicides or to suicide in general (of which there are several in *Ulysses*), nor of course does it take account of references by other characters to Rudolph's suicide or to other cases of suicide or to suicide in general.

66 While 'bloom' 'translates' Hungarian *virágzó*, the Hungarian for 'flower' is *virág*. Correcting the slight mistranslation of his father's name, Virag, into English 'bloom', Bloom identifies himself in his pen name even more closely with his father. See *Ulysses* 432: 'Bloom. The change of name. Virag'. The name that Bloom adopts, 'Henry Flower', also in fact has other, historical suicide connections: see Peter Costello, *James Joyce: The Years of Growth, 1882–1915: A Biography* (London: Kyle Cathie, 1992), p. 169.

67 There are also a series of intertextual references/allusions to other suicide narratives in 'Hades', including references to *Romeo and Juliet* (*U* 104), *Hamlet* (*U* 93, 105), Donizetti's *Lucia de Lammermoor* (*U* 106), the 'dead march' in Handel's *Saul* (*U* 94), and the judicial suicide of Socrates (*U* 99).

68 See Robert H. Bell's comment that in 'Hades' the 'memory of [Bloom's] father is virtually a siren call to self-destruction' (*Jocoserious Joyce: The Fate of Folly in 'Ulysses'* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 82).

69 See also *U* 109 for another reference to this appointment on 27 June.
70 See also Jeri Johnson's comments on the Hungarian struggle for independence from Austria as a model for Sinn Fein (*U* 896nn.).
71 See also *U* 323, where Martin Cunningham tells of the change of name from Virag to Bloom.
72 According to Glenway Wescott, amongst Joyce's other fears was the fear of water (Mikhail, ed., *Interviews and Recollections*, p. 101).
73 Much on Bloom's mind, this suicide is again alluded to in Lestrygonians as he also momentarily contemplates throwing himself into the Liffey (*U* 145). Joyce took the case from an actual incident, in fact, although one that didn't take place until 1911. As it happens, this version of events was disputed by the protagonist, who later sued the BBC for repeating the tale, claiming that he had jumped into the Liffey to rescue his hat (see Ellmann, *James Joyce*, p. 39n).
74 'Drown Barabbas!' is foundationally anti-Semitic, since it is a reference to the original excuse for anti-Semitism (Pilate released the Jewish convict Barabbas instead of Christ, and Christ's crucifixion is therefore blamed on the Jewish people in general). On Dodd and anti-Semitism, see Davison, *James Joyce, 'Ulysses' and the Construction of Jewish Identity*, pp. 57–60.
75 This identification is often repeated, for example by Molly when she remembers her husband's abortive plan to open a hotel: 'Blooms private hotel he suggested go and ruin himself altogether the way his father did down in Ennis' (*U* 716) ('ruin himself altogether' might also be taken as another reference to Rudolph's suicide, of course).
76 See also *U* 69 and 496, for references to the 'law of falling bodies' as thirty-two feet per second per second.
77 For clarity, I have corrected a misplaced parenthesis here: the final closing brackets in the published text comes incorrectly after 'place aforesaid'.
78 Both aconite and chloroform have other, therapeutic uses, after all: in the early twentieth century both were used as an anaesthetic and aconite as a common sedative.
79 Critics have tended to elide the suicidality of John Joyce. Even his biographers, John Wyse Jackson and Peter Costello, have little to say about this aspect of Joyce's father's character, although they do note the 'death threats' contained in some of his letters (see *John Stanislaus Joyce*, pp. 258, 301–2, 313). One critic who comes close to the recognition of the influence of John's suicidal tendencies is John Gordon, who argues that *Finnegans Wake* is 'a portrait of the artist' as another man, the man who didn't fly to Paris but stayed in Ireland – like his father; Gordon concurs with Hugh Kenner's assessment that John Joyce is 'the *Wake*'s main source', and he comments on John as 'drinking not only his family but himself into ruin: rotting himself, addling his brain, killing himself, paying himself off, all with "pa's malt"' (*Finnegans Wake: A Plot Summary* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986), pp. 91, 102).
80 Robert Scholes and Richard M. Kain, eds., *The Workshop of Daedalus: James Joyce and the Raw Materials for 'A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man'* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1965) p. 103. On Joyce's

remarkably close relationship with his father, see Louis Gillet, *Claybook for James Joyce*, trans. Georges Markow-Totevy (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1958), pp. 103–4: Gillet argues that the relationship between the two was 'the central factor in Joyce's life, the basis, the axis of his work'.

81 For such an analysis, see Stanislaus Joyce, *The Complete Dublin Diary of Stanislaus Joyce*, ed. George H. Healey (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), passim.

82 The comment is rarely even cited by critics. It is quoted by Jackson and Costello, but with no comment (*John Stanislaus Joyce*, p. 309).

83 Ibid., p. 294.

84 Broken heartedness in fact seems to have been transferred from John's threat to his *wife* when alive, to a description of what has happened to *him* after her death: 'It was a constant threat of his to Mother, "I'll break your heart! I'll break your bloody heart!"', Stanislaus Joyce records in his diary (*Dublin Diary*, p. 176): his father's behaviour, both before and after his wife's death, involves what, in the final sentence of the *Diary*, Stanislaus refers to memorably as 'the business of breaking hearts' (p. 178). By 1920, the hysteria has been toned down, but still John professes himself to be near death: 'My time is very nearly up', he tells Joyce (*Letters* 2.457).

85 See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd edn. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), p. 50e (§129): 'The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity'.

86 On John Joyce as figuring in the characters of both Simon Dedalus and Leopold Bloom, see for example Jackson and Costello, *John Stanislaus Joyce*, pp. 377–8, 402–3: *Ulysses* is 'in many ways about failed fatherhood', Jackson and Costello comment, 'but it took the author's own failed father to engender it' (p. 378). See also Joyce's comment to Alfred Bergan that 'No man could be worthy of such intense love as my father had for me' (*Letters* 3.253).

5 'DEATH DEATH DEATH LOVELY DEATH'

1 *The Divine Comedy of Dane Alighieri, Volume 1: Inferno*, trans. Robert M. Durling (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), Canto 13, ll.58–9; Don Paterson, 'The Forest of the Suicides', from *Landing Light* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p. 11; the epigraph is from p. 13. See Elisa Segnini and Elizabeth Jones, '"I was back in a dark wood": Don Paterson's "The Forest of the Suicides"', *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate* 24:1 (2014), 143–68.

2 Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 224 (references to Plath's poems are to this edition, hereafter abbreviated as *CP*).

3 Paterson, *Landing Light*, pp. 11–12, 13.

4 Jack Barbera and William McBrien, eds., *Me Again: Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith* (London: Virago, 1981), p. 263 (hereafter cited in the text as *MA*).

5 On the latter point, we should note that at least since the publication of Émile Durkheim's ground-breaking study in 1897, suicidologists have regularly recognized that, notwithstanding significant variations in suicide rates in relation to national, political, ideological, religious, sociocultural, economic, and other factors, there are at least two constants in the statistics that transcend the locally and historically specific. In the first place, there seems to be no society in which the suicide rate is zero. As far as we know, inasmuch as anything in human life can be thought of as 'universal', suicide is: it features in every society for which we have records. Secondly, with a small number of exceptions, men in almost all societies kill themselves more frequently than women (characteristically two to four times more frequently) – even while women conceive of and indeed *attempt* suicide more than men. But if attempted suicide can be considered an extreme form of suicide ideation – towards one extreme in a continuum that has momentary speculation at one end and 'successful' or completed suicide at the other – we might imagine that suicide ideation has a particularly powerful impact on women, or that women tend, generally more so than men, to be suicide ideators. On the suicide 'gender paradox', see, for example, Silvia Sara Canetto and Isaac Sakinofsky, 'The Gender Paradox in Suicide', *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 28:1 (1998), 1–23. WHO age-standardized statistics from 2012 show that in the 171 countries listed, only China (8.7 per 100,000 female to 7.1 per 100,000 male suicides) and Iraq (2.1 female, 1.2 male) have higher rates of female to male suicide; that the overall world ratio of male to female suicide is 1.9:1; and that male to female rates are as high as c.8:1 in Morocco and Poland, and c.6:1 in Lithuania and the Russian Federation (anomalously, in Malta, the ratio is 16:1 amongst its c. 400,000 citizens). We should perhaps note that, for a variety of reasons – including the influence of local cultural, political, medical, and religious circumstances, ideologies, and preconceptions on the collection and the interpretation of mortality – national suicide statistics are notoriously unreliable: WHO statistics for 2012 range from an unlikely official overall rate of 0.4 per 100,000 in Saudi Arabia to more than 44 per 100,000 in Guyana (population c.800,000) (see www.who.int/gho/mental_health/suicide_rates/en/). On literature and female suicide, see Margaret Higonnet, 'Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the Nineteenth Century', *Poetics Today*, 6 (1985), 103–18, and 'Frames of Female Suicide', *Studies in the Novel* 32 (2000), 229–42.

6 Sylvia Plath, 'Context', *London Magazine* 1:12 (February 1962), 46 (the editors' question is from p. 27).

7 Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950–1963*, ed. Aurelia Schober Plath (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 344 (hereafter cited in the text as *LH*): 'We met the mad and very nice Robert Lowell . . . whom we both admire' and who is 'periodically carted off as a manic depressive', she records. On 29 January 1959, Lowell came to dinner and Plath baked her speciality desert, a lemon meringue pie (see Karen V. Kukil, ed., *The Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950–1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), pp. 465, 467; hereafter cited in the text as *J*); 'I make a damn good lemon meringue pie', Plath tells herself in February 1958 (*J* 323), and she made a 'superb' one in January 1959, a week before the dinner with Lowell (*J* 462).

8 Peter Orr, ed., *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 167–8 (the interview is from October 1962).

9 'If you're not careful . . . you will out-Roethke Roethke', Anne Sexton pointedly recalls writing to Plath after the publication of *The Colossus* in 1960 ('The Barfly Ought to Sing', in Charles Newman, ed., *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), p. 178). See Stephen Axelrod, *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 63, on Lowell and Roethke as the 'two male poets she read most intently, the two who most instructed her'; on the *agon* of Plath's relationship with the two poets, see pp. 63–70. (Axelrod suggests that Cal in *The Bell Jar* is named after 'Cal' Lowell and that 'Ariel' is named to take revenge on the poet who was nicknamed partly after Caliban; p. 66). On the influence of Lowell, Roethke, and Bishop, see also Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* (New York: Harper, 2015), p. 156; on 'Poem for a Birthday', see p. 174; on that poem as Plath's 'breakthrough', see p. 354.

10 See Gary Lane, 'Influence and Originality in Plath's Poems', in idem, ed., *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 122: 'She was lost daughter to his lost son . . . in their long and painful searches for a dead Papa Otto . . . they were nearly siblings'; see also Plath's comment on the poem 'Who' (which she calls 'October in the Toolshed') as having 'Roethke's influence, yet mine' (*J* 521); see also Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, new edition (London: Virago, 1997), pp. 50–3.

11 Plath's letter to Smith is cited, for example, on the back cover of Will May, ed., *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith* (London: Faber and Faber, 2015) (all quotations from Smith's poems are from this edition, abbreviated as *CPD*; dates cited are those given by May, where available). It is notable, for example, that while Axelrod pays a great deal of attention to Plath's poetic precursors and especially to the influence of Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, and other female writers, he fails to mention Smith (see *Sylvia Plath*, especially ch. 3). In this sense, Smith is often excluded from accounts of what Christina Britzolakis calls Plath's 'repressed "matrilineage"' (*Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), p. 70 (see pp. 69–72). On Plath's identification with England, see Al Alvarez's remarks that Plath 'used to refer to herself as an English poet' (*Beyond All this Fiddle: Essays, 1955–1967* (London: Allen Lane, 1968), p. 46); from her early days at Cambridge University in 1955 until her death in London in 1963, there are frequent and frequently changing references in letters and journal entries to her identification with or against America and England, and to her love for and antipathy towards both countries (see, for example, *LH* 282, 287, 293, 304, 305, 309, 347, 377, 433, 438, 446, 465, 472, 481, 486, 282); in a 1962 interview, she comments that 'the poets who excite me most are the Americans' and that 'there are very few contemporary English poets that I admire' (Orr, ed., *Interviews*, p. 168).

12 Plath's letter to Smith is printed in full in the introduction to *Me Again*, p. 6.

13 See Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 256.

14 Suicide is a compulsion that Plath also shared with Anne Sexton, who recalls talking 'at length, in detail and in depth' with her about their respective attempted suicide in Boston in 1959 ('The Barfly Ought to Sing', p. 175).
15 Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper, or Work It Out for Yourself* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1936), pp. 219–20. See also Christopher Ricks's comment that Shakespeare's Sonnet 66 ('Tired with all these, for restful death I cry') was 'never far from Smith's thoughts' and that many of Smith's best poems 'cry for restful death'. 'Among her many subjects', he notes, 'Stevie Smith had two great ones, children and death' ('Stevie Smith: "Great Is Truth and Will Prevail in a Bit"', *Grand Street* 1 (1981), 148, 151).
16 Diane Mehta, 'A Chain on the Great Feelings', *Paris Review* (February 11, 2014), np: accessed online.
17 Linda Anderson, 'Gender, Feminism, Poetry: Stevie Smith, Sylvia Plath, Jo Shapcott', in Neil Corcoran, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 177, 174.
18 See Smith's 'Papa Love Baby': 'And a fortnight later papa ran away to sea' (*CPD* 5).
19 Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper*, pp. 155–6.
20 Ibid., p. 159.
21 Spalding, *Stevie Smith*, p. 17.
22 Interview with John Horder, *The Guardian*, 7 June 1965; quoted in Spalding, *Stevie Smith*, p. 17.
23 Kay Dick, *Ivy and Stevie: Ivy Compton-Burnett and Stevie Smith, Conversations and Reflections* (London: Allison and Busby, 1983), p. 71.
24 Ibid., p. 70.
25 Philip Larkin, 'This Be the Verse', in *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*, ed. Archie Burnett (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), p. 88.
26 Dick, *Ivy and Stevie*, pp. 70–1.
27 John Gale, 'Death Is a Poem to Stevie Smith', *The Observer*, 9 November, 1969, p. 21; see also *MA* 129: 'I think if there were no death, life would be more than flesh and blood could bear'.
28 Jessica Walsh, 'Stevie Smith: Girl, Interrupted', *Papers on Language and Literature* 40 (2004), 80.
29 Stevie Smith, *The Spoken Word* (audio CD; London: British Library Sound Archive, 2009), track 24. See Smith's 'From the Coptic', l.22–3: 'I am Death, said the angel, and death is the end, / I am Man, cries the clay rising, and you are my friend' (*CPD* 324). This is what Smith calls 'the simplest of all thoughts' in a 1964 essay, 'Simply Living': 'the thought of Death as a friend', one that 'must come when we call, although he is a god' (*MA* 110). And it is indeed a repeated refrain – that Death will come, *must* come – when we call: see, for example, 'What Poems Are Made Of' (1969; *MA* 129), and poems such as 'Death Came To Me' (*CPD* 46), and 'Venus When Young Choosing Death' (*CPD* 526). Compare Barbera and McBrien, 'Introduction' to *Me Again* (*MA* 2), and Spalding's comment, 'One idea shaping Stevie's attitude to death was the familiar theme of death as a lover' (*Stevie Smith*, p. 302).

30 An uncannily similar wording occurs in an entry from Sylvia Plath's journals dated 18 April 1956 when her grandmother is dying of cancer: 'she has not even been able to have intravenous feeding for six weeks but is living on her body, which will be all sublimed away, and then only she may die' (*J* 236).

31 Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 151. For death as drowning/oceanic in Smith, see for example, 'The Doctor', 'Not Waving but Drowning', 'Mr Over', 'Flow, Flow, Flow'; see J. Edward Mallot, 'Not Drowning but Waving: Stevie Smith and the Language of the Lake', *Journal of Modern Literature* 27 (2003), 171–87, on Smith's poems as revealing 'again and again a particular fascination with drowning' (174). See Vladeta Ajdacic-Gross et al., 'Methods of Suicide: International Suicide Patterns Derived from the WHO Mortality Database, *Bulletin of the WHO* 86 (2008), 726–32 (www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/86/9/07–043489/en/), which shows that women kill themselves by drowning approximately twice as frequently as men in the United Kingdom and United States – frequencies of 2.4/4.7 (UK men/women), and 0.9/2.1 (US men/women) as percentages of all suicides (Table 1, using statistics from 1930 to 2006). Compare Maria DiBattista's comment, in a discussion of Virginia Woolf's death, that death-by-drowning involves an 'essentially feminine mystique' ('*To the Lighthouse*: Virginia Woolf's Winter Tale', in Ralph Freedman, ed., *Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 175).

32 Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*, in Pat Rogers, ed., Alexander Pope, The Major *Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), Epistle I, lines 92–8.

33 William May, *Stevie Smith and Authorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 45; see also May's comment in the introduction to his edition of Smith's poetry that 'allusion is a tricky customer in Smith's poetry' (*CPD* xxxiii). See Smith's comments in Jonathan Williams, '"Much Further out than You Thought": Stevie Smith (in Conversation & Celebration)', *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 2 (1974), 109, 110, on 'catching' echoes of other writers and being on her guard with regard to her contemporaries: 'I feel I might catch the too-easy echo. It's like getting telephone lines crossed – you get something through, but it's meant for another, not for you'.

34 Spalding, *Stevie Smith*, pp. 299, 301.

35 For Smith's interest in Browning's poem, see also 'Childe Roladine' (*CPD* 380–1). Spalding explains that Browning was 'an especial favourite' with the young Stevie Smith and that the imagery of 'Childe Roland' 'remained deeply ingrained' (*Stevie Smith*, p. 22).

36 Williams, '"Much Further out than You Thought"', 112.

37 Dick, *Ivy and Stevie*, p. 74.

38 Quoted in Spalding, *Stevie Smith*, p. 253.

39 On entropy as a 'cultural buzzword' in the 1960s (Thomas Pynchon, for example, published a short story in 1960 titled 'Entropy'), see Matilde Nardelli, '"The Sprawl of Entropy": Cinema, Waste, and Obsolescence in the 1960s and 1970s', *European Journal of Media Studies* (Autumn 2013)

(www.necsus-ejms.org/the-sprawl-of-entropy-cinema-waste-and-obsolescence-in-the-1960s-and-1970s/).

40 Stephen James, 'Stevie Smith, "A Most Awful Twister"', *Essays in Criticism* 66 (2016), 244; see also 252 on 'the balance between strategy and serendipity, whimsy and wilful intent'.

41 Stevie Smith's comment in a letter on a lecture that she was to give on 'The Necessity of Not Believing' to the Cambridge Humanists in 1957 might be applied to much of her poetry: 'It is not *at all whimsical*, as some asses seem to think I am, but serious, yet not aggressive, & fairly cheerful though with melancholy patches' (*MA* 304). See William May's comment on Smith's 'protean voice': 'Her tone shifts from the recondite to the profound in a single line, and can be variously hectoring, plaintive, whimsical, indignant, elegiac, stoical, parodic, or portentous' (*Stevie Smith and Authorship*, p. 21).

42 For the poem as 'cunningly plotted', see Spalding, *Stevie Smith*, p. 256.

43 Smith uses 'felicitated' in a review of a biography of Radclyffe Hall in 1961 in this sense (*MA* 191).

44 See the two-line poem 'Death in the Rose Garden' for an 'apology' for suicide itself (*CPD* 242).

45 As it happens, the first eight lines of 'Death' were included, set out as prose, in Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper*, p. 161.

46 The list substitutes the rope for the gun that appears in a similar list in 'Death Came to Me' (*CPD* 46); in 'Mabel', death is found in the 'companionable' 'unlit gas' (*CPD* 723)

47 Spalding, *Stevie Smith*, p. 222.

48 See Will May, 'Unpublished Stevie Smith: Not Waving but Drawing', *The Guardian*, Saturday 19 September 2015, para.1 (accessed online).

49 The essay was subsequently broadcast as a talk on BBC radio in March 1957: see Laura Severin, *Stevie Smith's Resistant Antics* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p. 149n, and *CPD* 762. The poem was written on the weekend of 18–19 April 1953, as Smith tells Kay Dick in a letter of 25 April ('I felt too low for words (eh??) last weekend but work it off for all that in a poem . . . called "Not Waving but Drowning"' (MA 294); in other words, it was written just ten weeks before her suicide attempt on 1 July and at a time when, as Spalding explains, she had 'all the symptoms of the clinically depressed' (*Stevie Smith*, p. 213).

50 'Many of my poems are about the pains of solitude', Smith comments in a brief essay from 1969, 'What Poems Are Made Of' (*MA* 128).

51 See Spalding's somewhat tendentious description of the poem as a 'tragi-comic recollection of a man swimming in the sea whose signals for help are misinterpreted and ignored' (*Stevie Smith*, p. 222): clearly they can't be both misinterpreted *and* ignored.

52 Smith, *The Spoken Word*, track 12.

53 Ibid., track 24. A third recording broadcast on the BBC on 15 June 1966 is available in *The Poetry Archive* at www.poetryarchive.org/poem/not-waving-drowning: repeating some of the 1965 wording, the introduction on this occasion is more elaborate and in some ways more revealing: 'but really

he was drowning. This often happens in swimming baths or at the seaside – and then I thought that, in a way, it is true of life, too: that a lot of people pretend, out of bravery really, that they are very jolly and ordinary sort of chaps but really they do not feel at all at home in the world or able to make friends easily, so they joke a lot and laugh and people think they're quite alright and jolly nice too but sometimes the brave pretence breaks down and then, like the poor man in this poem, they are lost' (there is a mimeograph typescript of the broadcast with the author's handwritten corrections in the *Stevie Smith Papers, 1924-1970*, held by the McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa; I owe this reference to Noreen Masud).

54 Speech marks were, however, added when the poem was published in *Medical World*: see *CPD* 762.

55 In fact, the picture did not accompany the poem on first publication in *The Observer* in 1954 nor did it appear in Smith's essay 'Too Tired for Words' in *Medical World* in 1956, when the poem was quoted whole (with slight revisions), nor in the 1962 *Selected Poems*. As May comments, 'Critics who have included her drawings in their interpretations have tended to see them as undermining or subverting the meanings of the poem they accompany'; critics have highlighted 'the perplexing mismatch between the poem's male speaker and the female figure depicted in its illustration' (*Stevie Smith*, pp. 196–7). But this perplexing mismatch might itself be said to confirm or reinforce the poem's resistance not just to meaning but to the question of meaning-making. May also prints a *different* picture from a typed proof of the poem in the University of Tulsa library, which shows a man being dragged out of the sea (p. 198): 'Smith's decision to abandon this drawing for the apparently unrelated figure of the smiling girl at publication stage suggests her need to qualify the idea of a definitive reading of her work', May comments (ibid., p. 199).

56 Plath's phrase occurs in the *Journals* (*J* 475): I take 'maunch' to be Plath's spelling of the dialect word 'mange' – munch, chew (presumably from the French *manger*): she feasts on her own humiliation, hurt, distress.

57 Jeffrey Berman, *Surviving Literary Suicide* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), p. 137.

58 See Tracy Brain's comment that although 'narratives of Plath's life draw attention from where it should be' (from her writing), she 'holds a prominent place in the public domain' precisely because of the public's fascination with her life and tragic early death ('Dangerous Confessions: The Problem of Reading Sylvia Plath Biographically', in Jo Gill, ed., *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 29); and see Fred Moramarco, '"Burned-Up Intensity": The Suicidal Poetry of Sylvia Plath', *Mosaic* 15 (1982), 141–51.

59 Clare Emily Clifford, 'I Have a Self to Recover: Sylvia Plath and the Literary Success of the Failed Suicide', *Plath Profiles* 5 (2012), 285 (scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/plath/article/view/4385).

60 Jacqueline Rose has commented more generally on the double bind of Plath's reception as the 'injunction to go on talking about her' that is only matched

by 'an equal injunction not to say too much' (*The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, p. 2). See Elizabeth Leake, *After Words: Suicide and Authorship in Twentieth-Century Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011) on the problem of the suicided author for literary interpretation: Leake comments that 'the suicide of an author represents a crisis in critical theory, one that authorizes the temporary dismantling of theoretical constructs, with the consequence that after a suicide, the author becomes, effectively, absolutely central to our understanding (or misunderstanding) of the text' (p. 15).

61 Robert Lowell, 'Foreword', in Sylvia Plath, *Ariel* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. viii.

62 Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*, p. 2; see also p. 9.

63 Rose, *Haunting*, p. 23; see also Bate, *Ted Hughes*, p. 239.

64 A. Alvarez, 'The Art of Suicide', *Partisan Review* 3 (1970), 357; versions of the essay were subsequently published in Alvarez's 1971 study *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002) (these passages appear in pp. 281–2), and in Seymour Perlin, ed., *A Handbook for the Study of Suicide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

65 Alvarez, *Beyond All this Fiddle*, p. 57. In the published version of the essay (from 1966), Alvarez revises his take on the suicide by commenting in a 'postscript' that 'though death itself may have been a side-issue, it was also an unavoidable risk in writing her kind of poem' (p. 58).

66 Alvarez, *The Savage God*, p. 49 ('I am convinced by what I know of the facts that this time she did not intend to die'); see also pp. 53–6.

67 Alvarez, *Beyond all this Fiddle*, p. 58.

68 Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*, p. 2.

69 Hughes, ed., 'Introduction', *CP* 14–15 (Plath's ordering is detailed on p. 295). See Marjorie Perloff's comments that Hughes's arrangement 'implies that Plath's suicide was inevitable' and that 'it was brought on, not by her actual circumstances, but by her essential and seemingly incurable schizophrenia', as well as that 'Hughes makes the motif of inevitability larger than it really is': by contrast with Hughes's version of *Ariel*, which 'culminate[s] in a sense of finality, all passion spent', Plath's own planned arrangement 'emphasizes not death but struggle and revenge' following the revelation that 'the beloved is also the betrayer' ('The Two *Ariels*: The (Re)Making of the Sylvia Plath Canon', in Neil Fraistat, ed., *Poems in Their Place: The Intertextuality and Order of Poetic Collections* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), pp. 314, 330); see also Susan R. Van Dyne, *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1993), p. 101.

70 Thomas Travisano, ed., *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2008), p. 513. See Hugh Kenner, 'Sincerity Kills', in Lane, ed., *Sylvia Plath*, p. 43, who estimates that a third of the poems in *Ariel* are what he calls 'death poems'.

71 Moramarco, 'Burned-Up Intensity', 150. Moramarco's is one of the few critical assessments of Plath as a 'suicidal' poet as such, but focuses as much on

mortality as on suicidality, conflating 'suicidal fixations' with a 'willingness to look death straight in the eyes' (146).

72 Irving Howe, 'The Plath Celebration: A Partial Dissent', in Edward Butscher, ed., *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co, 1977), p. 226.

73 Susan Bassnett, 'Poetry and Survival', in Harold Bloom, ed., *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Sylvia Plath*, updated edition (New York: Chelsea House, 2007), p. 208.

74 Murray M. Schwartz and Christopher Bollas, 'The Absence at the Centre: Sylvia Plath and Suicide', in Lane, ed., *Sylvia Plath*, pp. 180–81.

75 Ibid., pp. 186, 184.

76 On this point, see Clare Emily Clifford, '"Suicides Have a Special Language": Practicing Literary Suicide with Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and John Berryman', in Andrew Fagan, ed. *Making Sense of Dying and Death* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 197–208.

77 See Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, pp. 4–5.

78 As Bassnett remarks, while Plath presents 'her breakdown story and suicide attempt' in *The Bell Jar* and her private journals, in her poetry she in fact characteristically 'writes *other* themes' ('Poetry and Survival', p. 211 (italics added)).

79 See *The Bell Jar*, pp. 142, 153, and see Plath's unsent letter from December 1953: 'the urge to life, mere physical life, is damn strong . . . The body is amazingly stubborn when it comes to sacrificing itself to the annihilating directions of the mind' (*LH* 130–1); in her story 'Tongues of Stone', the failed suicide 'curs[es] the dumb instinct in her body that fought to go on living' (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and Other Prose Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 273). Plath occasionally uses, in passing, the rhetoric of suicide in her letters to her mother, but rarely with serious intent (see, for example, *LH* 58). In November 1952 she is so worried about a science class at Smith that she tells her mother that she has 'practically considered committing suicide to get out of it' and that 'When one feels like leaving college and killing oneself over one course . . . it is a rather serious thing' (*LH* 97), but the tone is still somewhat flippant. For Plath's fascination with Woolf's suicide, see also her journal entry for November 1952: 'Why did Virginia Woolf commit suicide? Or Sara Teasdale – or the other brilliant women – neurotic? Was their writing sublimation (oh horrible word) of deep, basic desires?' (*J* 151). On this point, see Axelrod, *Sylvia Plath*, pp. 100–25.

80 'Panic', of course, is a key term in Plath's suicide discourse, used at least thirty-eight times in the journals (for 'panic bird', see *J* 424, 429, 486), and is perhaps most prominent in the 1958 short story 'Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams', where it is anthropomorphized as the figure of terror, despair, and suicidality: 'Panic with a dog-face, devil-face, hag-face, whore-face, panic in capital letters with no face at all' has a 'love' that is specifically suicidal – 'the twenty-story leap, the rope at the throat, the knife at the heart' (Plath, *Johnny Panic*, pp. 17, 33). See also *The Bell Jar*, pp. 32–3, on being 'panic-struck'.

81 See Andrew Marvell, 'To His Coy Mistress', lines 21–2 ('But at my back I always hear / Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near') (in George M. Logan et al., eds., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 8th edn., Volume B (New York: Norton, 2006), p. 1703); T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, lines 196–7 ('But at my back from time to time I hear / The sound of horns and motors') (in Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, eds., *The Poems of T. S. Eliot, Volume 1: Collected and Uncollected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), p. 62; Christopher Marlowe, *Dr Faustus*, Scene 13, lines 67–8 ('The stars move still, time runs, the clock will strike. / The devil will come, and Faustus must be damned') (in Logan et al., eds., *The Norton Anthology*, Volume B, p. 1054).

82 The other pressure points are 'deflowering, T[ed Hughes]'s sister, and present writing', her social life, and her lack of children (*J* 481).

83 In Britzolakis's succinct summary, Plath's suicide attempt is 'interpreted as an act of aggression directed against the mother who has come to be identified with a vampiric superego' (*Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*, p. 25); see also the conflation of suicide and matricide in Plath's story 'Tongues of Stone' (a reimagining of her 1953 suicide attempt or 'blackout'): 'During those last nights before her blackout the girl had lain awake listening to the thin thread of her mother's breathing, wanting to get up and twist the life out of the fragile throat, to end at once the process of slow disintegration which grinned at her like a death's head everywhere she turned' (*Johnny Panic*, p. 271).

84 See also *LH* 96, where Aurelia Plath notes that in November 1952, on hearing of a classmate of her brother committing suicide, Plath phoned home to talk about it, shocked.

85 See 'Typescript second draft of The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath', at www.bl.uk/collection-items/typescript-second-draft-of-the-bell-jar-by-sylvia-plath.

86 See Luke Ferretter, *Sylvia Plath's Fiction: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 43.

87 See *The Bell Jar*, pp. 152, 233.

88 Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, p. 272.

89 As Jacques Derrida comments, 'our thoughts of our death are always, structurally, thoughts of survival' (*The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume II*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 117); see also Freud's comment that 'in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality ('Thoughts for the Times on War and Death', in *The Penguin Freud Library, 12: Civilization, Society and Religion*, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 77). See also Plath's Easter Sunday comment in 1959 on 'the risen Christ meaning only a parable of human renewal and nothing of immortality' (*J* 475). In this, Clifford seems right when she comments that speakers in Plath's poems 'don't so much want to die as they want a *different* life' and carry the hope of 'one day recovering a peaceful life' ('I Have a Self to Recover', 287). As Clifford comments, Plath's individuals/speakers appear to be hopeful, rather than suicidally hopeless as they 'seek full responsibility, orchestration, and control over themselves for an entirely unachievable

and unrealistic outcome'; they achieve 'perfection not because of their repeated suicides but because of their failures to successfully die' (293, 294; see also 296). See also Berman, *Surviving Literary Suicide*, on Plath's need to 'commit suicide so that she could be magically reborn – a mythology that works better', he opines wryly, 'in literature than it does in life' (p. 140); more generally, see Anthony Giddens's comment that 'in many cases the intent to die is *not* clear-cut' and is 'in reality an appeal for life' ('Introduction' to *The Sociology of Suicide: A Selection of Readings* (London: Frank Cass, 1971), p. xvii; and see Herbert Hendin's comment that the desire to escape life is 'only part of [the] story' for the suicide ('Psychodynamics of Suicide', in ibid., p. 320) – Hendin lists 'retaliatory abandonment', omnipotent mastery, 'retroflexed murder', reunion, rebirth, self-punishment or atonement, and death as having already taken place emotionally as common fantasies and attitudes towards death in suicidal patients.

90 'Slow lust' for/of suicide is from 'Tongues of Stone' (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, p. 273). The executions of the Rosenbergs are also recorded, contemporaneously in a journal entry for the same day: 'All right, so the headlines blare the two of them are going to be killed at eleven o'clock tonight. So I am sick at the stomach. I remember the journalists report, sickeningly factual, of the electrocution of a condemned man, of the unconcealed fascination on the faces of the onlookers, of the details, the shocking physical facts about the death, the scream, the smoke, the bare honest unemotional reporting that gripped the guts because of the things it didn't say' (*J* 541).

91 See *The Bell Jar*, p. 138: Esther 'wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done' after her first ECT session.

92 See *J* 401: 'The subject appealed to me' in part because of the 'death-wish involved in the song's beauty'.

93 Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (London: Picador, 1994), p. 161.

94 W. H. Auden, 'Musée de Beaux Arts', in *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 80. See also Axelrod's comment on the poem as 'Lowellian' (*Sylvia Plath*, p. 66).

95 In the parallel episode in *The Bell Jar*, Esther comments ambiguously and ominously that she has a 'great yearning' to 'pay my father back for all the years of neglect, and start tending his grave' (p. 159).

96 Jahan Ramazani, '"Daddy, I Have Had to Kill You": Plath, Rage, and the Modern Elegy', *PMLA* 108 (1993), 1147: as Ramazani comments, the 'new story is ambiguous in its imputation of culpability'.

97 For an astute reading of this dream, see Linda K. Bundtzen, '"O the tangles of that old bed": Fantasies of Incest and the "Daddy" Narrative in *Ariel*', in Sally Bayley and Tracy Brain, eds., *Representing Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 57–8. The paternal suicide theory recurs, of course, in 'Daddy', with its reference in the final stanza to the 'stake in your fat black heart' (*CP* 224), a traditional treatment for suicides to stop them returning.

98 See Clifford, 'I Have a Self to Recover', 291, for a similar reading.

99 Plath recounts the media attention paid to her suicide attempt in *The Bell Jar*, pp. 190–2; and in a letter to her mother of December 1953 she wonders 'just how widely the news' of the suicide travelled, recounting that she had received letters 'from all over the United States from friends, relations, perfect strangers and religious crackpots' (*LH* 129). The link between suicide and fame also occurs at other points in *The Bell Jar*: Esther reads of George Pollucci's attempted suicide in the papers (p. 131), and she later recalls the headline about the implied suicide of a 'starlet' before comparing her own photograph with that of the dead girl (pp. 140–1). In both instances, suicide is associated with the consumption of peanuts – signifying the audience for popular entertainment – as it is elsewhere in *The Bell Jar* (for example, pp. 1, 147) and in 'Lady Lazarus'. For newspaper reports of Plath's disappearance in 1953, see Peter Steinberg, '"They Had to Call and Call": The Search for Sylvia Plath', *Plath Profiles* 3 (2010): http://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/plath/article/view/4677.

100 See Moramarco, 'Burned-Up Intensity', 148: 'Dying, of course, is not an art, though writing well about dying is, and it is the latter, not the former, that Plath did exceptionally well'; see also his comment, 'It is possible that suicide for Plath was a performance in much the same way that her poetry was a performance' (ibid.).

101 Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*, p. 151.

102 Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, p. 47.

103 See Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, on the 'irruption of the semiotic' in the poem (p. 227), and Bundtzen, 'Fantasies of Incest', p. 61, on Plath being 'intent on creating non-meaning – a "semiotic collapse"'.

104 In fact, Plath repeatedly took up or declared the wish to take up German between 1956 and 1962 ('I instinctively love German as my "mother and father" tongue', she writes in a letter in 1956; *LH* 206–7): see, for example, *LH*, 228, 256, 356, 394, 395, 448, 468.

105 The experience is directly recorded in the emotionally raw poem written on 11 July 1962, 'Words heard, by accident, over the phone' (*CP* 202–3).

106 See Susan Gubar, 'Prosopopoeia and Holocaust Poetry in English: Sylvia Plath and Her Contemporaries', in *Bloom's Modern Critical Views*, p. 179, for a similar point.

107 Suicide is also perhaps at work within the figuration of communication and noncommunication that constitutes Plath's trial run for 'Daddy', 'Little Fugue'. As Jacqueline Rose comments, the starting point of 'Little Fugue' is 'the complete loss of the physical conditions that make communication possible' (*The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, p. 219).

108 Deborah S. Gentry, *The Art of Dying: Suicide in the Works of Kate Chopin and Sylvia Plath* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 89.

109 See Britzolakis's comment that the poem has 'often served as the telos of a completed psychobiographical narrative'. But as she also remarks (without elaborating the point), it can and perhaps should instead be read as foregrounding 'the deceptiveness of such totalizations' (*Sylvia Plath and the*

Theatre of Mourning, p. 166). In an essay that seeks to trace an identifiable pathology of suicide in Plath's work, Jennifer Yaros argues that five poems written 'close to the time of her death, "Elm," "Lady Lazarus", "Words", "Contusion" and "Edge," exemplify a progression of suicidal indicators in chronological order' ('Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Suicide', *Plath Profiles* 1 (2008), 240 (https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/plath/article/view/4789)).

110 Alvarez, *The Savage God*, pp. 51, 52.

111 See Axelrod, *Sylvia Plath*, p. 235, on Plath's 'last spare, almost affectless poems'; Tim Kendall suggests that Plath moves from the 'hope of rebirth' in the poems of autumn 1962 to a 'resignation' that 'create[s] a new style from despair' in the final poems of late January and early February 1963 (*Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 190).

112 See Kendall, ibid., p. 207, on the 'inevitability of death' in 'Edge' and other late poems. In fact, it is important to remember that it is the '*illusion* of Greek necessity' that the poem mentions rather than Greek (or any other) necessity as such.

113 Compare Axelrod, *Sylvia Plath*, p. 21, on 'the sound of silence registering not as language at all but as noise, as radio static'.

114 Axelrod, *Sylvia Plath*, pp. 21, 233.

115 Plath, *Johnny Panic*, p. 268.

116 See Berman, *Surviving Literary Suicide*, p. 141: 'A suicidal poem, no less than an act of suicide, may be a cry for help'.

117 On suicide as a mode of communication (and as a fantasy of surviving one's own death), see Jack Douglas, *The Social Meanings of Suicide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967). See also Richard K. Sanderson, 'Relational Deaths: Narratives of Suicide Survivorship', in G. Thomas Couser and Joseph Fichtelberg, eds., *True Relations: Essays on Autobiography and the Postmodern* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), on suicide as 'a communication, an interpersonal or "dyadic" act, a self-dramatization performed before an audience consisting of the suicide and of other persons' and on the idea that 'the most noteworthy feature of narratives by suicide survivors is that they are responses not simply to an experience but to a relationship act, to a communication' (p. 35). But see Ida Kodrlová, 'Suicidal Risk Factors in Lives of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath', *PsyARt* (2006) (www.psyartjournal.com/article/show/kodrlov-suicidal_risk_factors_in_lives_of_virgin) on the importance for Plath of an audience for her writing that would confirm her identity: 'although Sylvia Plath felt good about her writings at the end of her life, still she has lost that confirming other (i.e. her husband Ted Hughes) and had nobody else who would provide her with the sufficient and efficient care and potentially functioned as the important superego'.

118 See Schwartz and Bollas, 'The Absence at the Centre', p. 199: 'It seems to us that her actual suicide was an attempt to enact and to be rescued from an inner torment that she could no longer speak without intensifying her pain'.

119 Alvarez, *Beyond All this Fiddle*, p. 56; Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, pp. 115, 118.

120 See Van Dyne on Plath's 'performance of an enraged woman' in the poems of autumn 1962 and the fact that since her marriage with Ted Hughes depended on the idea of a 'fusion' of the two, 'revenge always carried with it the risk of self-destruction' (ibid., p. 33). See also p. 123 on suicide for Plath as representing 'one kind of revenge, poetry another'. For Van Dyne, writing about suicide was a 'calculated risk' (p. 126). One of the most careful considerations of the therapeutic value and otherwise of suicide expression in Plath is Berman's chapter on the poet in *Surviving Literary Suicide* (see especially pp. 151–2). See also Edwin S. Shneidman, 'Risk Writing: A Special Note about Cesare Pavese and Joseph Conrad', *Journal of The American Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry* 7 (1979), 575–92, on writing as both 'risk and as rescue' with regard to suicidality, and his assertion that 'most of the time, for most writers, it probably does neither' (591).

121 Berman, *Surviving Literary Suicide*, p. 164.

122 See also May, *Stevie Smith and Authorship*, pp. 103–6.

123 While conceding that the poem may also be autobiographical, Barbera and McBrien wonder whether 'Mabel' was written partly in response to the news of Plath's death ('In her loneliness Mabel / Found the hiss of the unlit gas / Companionable / And in a little time, dying / Sublime'; *CPD* 723) (*MA* 6).

124 See Higonnet, 'Frames', 230, on suicide as the 'enigmatic object of interpretation' and as '*not* giv[ing] final determination to meaning': suicide 'threatens to remove a person not just from the social order but from the order of knowledge', Higonnet comments (231).

125 Jean Améry, *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death*, trans. John D. Barlow (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 121; on suicide as a message or act of communication, see ch. 4 passim.

126 Christopher Reid, ed., *The Letters of Ted Hughes* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), pp. 445–6, 447, 523, 721.

127 See Alvarez, 'Prologue', to *The Savage God*: by this account, Plath carefully designed and timed the act so that she would be discovered, and this was just one more in a potentially endless series of 'attempts' or performances. By contrast, Hughes (whose *Birthday Letters* is profoundly fatalistic in multiple ways) charts Plath's horoscope in a letter to Olwyn a few months after meeting his wife in which she is shown to be 'suicidal' (*Letters*, p. 78; see Hughes's later comment on his own luck: 'There is no explanation for it, though astrology, of course, explains it all'; p. 104). In a letter to Aurelia of July 1966, however, Hughes talks about the permissive effect that *Ariel* is having on 'teenagers at college' and about 'all the insane rubbish talked about the "fatal" nature of her gift, that she could not come back from these poems, etc', whereas he sees the poems as having 'cured' her (p. 259).

128 Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 107; *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans.

Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 69; compare Jean Baechler, *Suicides*, trans. Barry Cooper (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), p. 21, on the 'exclusive privilege' of the human to distinguish between 'I' and 'me' and to 'conceive of oneself as a means with respect to an end'.

129 See Roy F. Baumeister, 'Suicide as Escape from Self', *Psychological Review* 97 (1990), 101, on the 'rejection of meaning' in suicidal people (as part of what he calls 'cognitive deconstruction').

130 Howe, 'The Plath Celebration', p. 235.

131 George Steiner, 'Dying Is an Art', in Newman, ed., *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, p. 218.

6 'WHAT MUST IT HAVE BEEN LIKE?'

1 It is perhaps significant that Richard Brown is based on the US writer Harold Brodkey, who died of an AIDS-related illness in 1996; Laura is based on Michael Cunningham's mother: see John Mullan, 'The Hours by Michael Cunningham: Week Three: Readers' Responses', *The Guardian*, 8 July 2011, and 'Michael Cunningham meets the Guardian book club – podcast' (www.theguardian.com/books/audio/2011/jul/12/michael-cunningham-the-hours-podcast).

2 Michael Cunningham, *The Hours* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999), p. 200 (hereafter cited in the text as *H*).

3 See Victor Brombert, *Musings on Mortality: From Tolstoy to Primo Levi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 69, on the 'disposition' of Woolf's Mrs Dalloway 'to feel another's death in her own body': 'She literally feels the "thud, thud, thud" in his brain and then the "suffocation of blackness"'.

4 See Amy Coplan, 'Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects', in Coplan and Peter Goldie, eds., *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 5, who proposes a definition of empathy as 'a complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person's situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiations'.

5 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 141.

6 George Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life', *Selected Poems, Essays and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 110.

7 David Foster Wallace, *Oblivion: Stories* (London: Abacus, 2004), p. 181.

8 James Schiff, 'An Interview with Michael Cunningham', *Missouri Review* 26 (2003), 116–17.

9 Ibid., 117. Elsewhere Cunningham describes this as 'my voice deeply influenced by her voice' and his desire to 'strain my voice through hers' (podcast interview with John Mullan).

10 Schiff, 'Interview', 117.

11 Ibid., 121. See also Cunningham's comment on Woolf's novel: 'One of the wonders of Mrs. Dalloway, which I didn't really try to reproduce in my book, or just did ever so seldom, is the way in which consciousness is passed almost as a baton from person to person. If Clarissa sees an old woman in the park, we're – bam! – just for a second in the consciousness of the old woman. What's so great about that is that Woolf doesn't try to give the old woman's story, she just takes us through her consciousness for a second' (120). On the influence of *Mrs Dalloway* on Cunningham, see also Monica Girard, 'Virginia Woolf's Suicide Notes: Michael Cunningham's Art of Transposing a Life's Epilogue into a Fictitious Prologue', in Sylvie Crinquand, ed., *Last Letters* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), pp. 37–53.

12 See Amy Coplan 'Empathic Engagement with Narrative Fictions', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62 (2004), 141–52. Coplan draws on scholars who distinguish between ('mature') empathy and ('immature') 'contagion', where the latter involves a collapsing of the distinction between self and other (144–5); and between empathy and sympathy, where the latter involves 'feeling *for* another' rather than 'sharing the other's experience', 'having concern for another's well-being' rather than 'imaginatively experiencing her mental states' (145). See also Lauren Wispé, 'History of the Concept of Empathy', in *Empathy and Its Development*, ed. Nancy Eisenberg and Janet Strayer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 17–37; Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim, eds., *Rethinking Empathy through Literature* (London: Routledge, 2014); Suzanne Keen, 'Narrative Empathy', in Peter Hühn et al., eds., *The Living Handbook of Narratology* (www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/narrative-empathy).

13 David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano, 'Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind', *Science* 342 (18 October 2013), 377–80. See also P. Matthijs Bal and Martijn Veltkamp, 'How Does Fiction Reading Influence Empathy? An Experimental Investigation on the Role of Emotional Transportation', *PLoS ONE* 8 (2013), 1–12, who argue, 'Increase of emotional transportation enhances empathy for fiction readers while it does not for nonfiction readers, such that it leads to higher empathy at relatively high levels of transportation' (8); and Maja Djikic, et al, 'Reading Other Minds: Effects of Literature on Empathy', *Scientific Study of Literature* 3 (2013), 28–47.

14 Kidd and Castano, 'Reading Literary Fiction', 377

15 Kidd and Castano selected three stories from Laura Furman, ed., *The PEN/O. Henry Prize Stories 2012: The Best Stories of the Year* (New York: Anchor, 2012).

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., 377–8.

18 Ibid., 378.

19 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 5.

20 Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: Norton, 2007), p. 28

21 Ibid., 39, 65.

22 Ibid., 55, 48.
23 Ibid., 45, 55. As Hunt reminds us, the eighteenth-century word for empathy was 'sympathy': critics and philosophers such as Adam Smith and Francis Hutchinson argue that 'by a sort of contagion or infection . . . all our pleasures . . . are strangely increased by their being shared with others' (Hutchinson, *A Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy, in Three Books* (Glasgow: Robert Foulis, 1747), p. 14 (see Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, p. 65).
24 Stephen Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: A History of Violence and Humanity* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 211.
25 Ibid., p. 213.
26 Ibid., p. 689. Compare Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2009). Pinker also qualifies this claim, in fact, by warning that there is no direct and necessary connection between 'sympathetic concern' for another's well-being – the kind of empathy that should presumably be encouraged – and effects of emotional 'contagion', mimicry, vicarious emotion, and mirror neurons, with which such concern is often conflated and confused (p. 694). As Pinker comments, 'Empathy has a dark side' (p. 712) since it can be directed towards a *lack* of justice, for example, when one empathizes with one individual at the expense of others; and since it can be local or parochial, restricted to family, community, class, or nation, and thereby almost by definition can be discriminatory towards others, strangers, foreigners, outgroups, and so on (pp. 713–14).
27 Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 4
28 Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 109; see Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, pp. 47–8, 54; see also pp. 147, 159–60; Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 36.
29 Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 99.
30 Ibid., p. 60.
31 Perhaps the nearest Keen comes to this question is her brief comment that while 'literary critics and professionals value novels that unsettle convictions and contest norms, readers' reactions to familiar situations and formulaic plot trajectories may underlie their genuinely empathetic reactions to predictable plot events and to the stereotyped figures that enact them' (p. 96).
32 Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 42–3 and passim; see also Graham McFee, 'Empathy: Interpersonal vs Artistic?', in Coplan and Goldie, ed., *Empathy*: McFee doubts that 'we can import "insight" from empathy in the interpersonal case to the empathetic reading of literature' (p. 207).
33 Christopher Damien Chung, '"Almost Unnamable": Suicide in the Modernist Novel' (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2008), p. 235.
34 Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), p. 37 (hereafter cited in the text as *VS*). On the plural narrator of *The Virgin Suicides*, see Debra Shostak, '"A Story We Could Live With": Narrative Voice, the

Reader, and Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*', *Modern Fiction Studies* 55 (2009), 808–32. The question of the plural narrators in *The Virgin Suicides* is crucial even while it is often overlooked: in *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 72–83, for example, Kenneth Millard refers consistently to the narrator (singular), even while arguing that 'the narrator's use of "we" gives the novel's enquiries a general currency for the depiction of male sexuality' (p. 81).

35 Jeffrey Eugenides, 'Introduction' to Peter Handke, *A Sorrow beyond Dreams*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: New York Review of Books, 2002), p. viii.

36 For an analysis of this analogue as 'one of the novel's most significant moments', see Millard, *Coming of Age*, pp. 80–1.

37 In a 2003 interview, Eugenides comments illuminatingly on the multiple narrators in the novel, as well as referring to the switch from first- to third-person narrator in *Middlesex* (2002): 'I don't know why I seem to like impossible voices. I think it may come from religious literature, you get a voice that issues from a mysterious place and tells you things of the utmost importance. There's something I like about that, about not being able to know exactly where the voice is coming from. Certainly, that's the case in *The Virgin Suicides* where you don't know how many boys it is. Is it one, two or a hundred, you don't know. But the voice is compelling and holding your attention and it seems to me that only in novels and in literature can you come up with such voices. So I, at least in these two novels, tried to take advantage of the ability of novels to be told by voices that you don't encounter every day' (Bram van Moorhem interviews Jeffrey Eugenides, *3:am Magazine* (2003) (www.3ammagazine.com/litarchives/2003/sep/interview_jeffrey_eugenides.html).

7 INSIDE DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S HEAD

1 Don DeLillo, 'Informal Remarks from the David Foster Wallace Memorial Service in New York on October 23, 2008', in Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou, eds., *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), p. 23.

2 David Foster Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction', in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (London: Abacus, 1998), p. 51.

3 Jonathan Franzen, 'Farther Away: *Robinson Crusoe*, David Foster Wallace, and the Island of Solitude', *The New Yorker* (April 18, 2011), 93, 92. Franzen speaks eloquently of loneliness and the 'near-perfect absence . . . of ordinary love' in Wallace's fiction: according to Franzen, Wallace was 'a lifelong prisoner on the island of himself' (90–91). See also James Ryerson, 'Introduction: A Head that Throbbed Heart-Like: The Philosophical Mind of David Foster Wallace', in David Foster Wallace, *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will*, ed. Steven M. Cahn and Maureen Eckert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 24–33, on loneliness and philosophical solipsism in Wallace: 'There was a palpable strain for Wallace', Ryerson argues, 'between engagement with

the world, in all its overwhelming fullness, and withdrawal to one's own head, in all its loneliness' (p. 33).

4 Larry McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace', in Stephen J. Burn, ed., *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 21–2; see also pp. 32–3.

5 'David Foster Wallace Interview 2003 (06/09)' (interview on 'Aspekte', German TV channel ZDF, 3 January 2003): accessed on www.youtube.com, 2 September 2016.

6 McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview', p. 22.

7 Hugh Kennedy and Geoffrey Polk, 'Looking for a Garde of Which to be Avant: An Interview with David Foster Wallace', in Burn, ed., *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, p. 16.

8 David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest: A Novel* (London: Abacus, 1996), p. 112: further references are cited in the text as *IF*.

9 McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview', p. 43.

10 Anne Marie Donahue, 'David Foster Wallace Winces at the Suggestion that His Book Is Sloppy in Any Sense', in Burn, ed., *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, pp. 70–1: 'And there's also a strange loneliness, and a desire to have some kind of conversation with people, but not a real great ability to do it in person', he goes on.

11 Kennedy and Polk, 'Looking for a Garde', p. 14.

12 'A lot of *The Broom of the System* is weirdly autobiographical', Wallace comments, for example, 'in ways that no one else knows' (ibid., p. 12).

13 Quoted in David Lipsky, 'The Lost Years and Last Days of David Foster Wallace', in *The Best American Magazine Writing of 2009*, compiled by the American Society of Magazine Editors (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 138.

14 Ibid., p. 145; the same comment in a different context is recorded by D. T. Max in *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (London: Granta, 2012), p. 165. See also Wallace's comment that his *Harper's* journalism pieces 'were me peeling back my skull' (Lipsky, 'The Lost Years', p. 154) and his comment on his journalism that what he can do in such writing is to 'slice open my head for you, and let you see a cross-section of an averagely bright person's head' (Tom Scocca, 'David Foster Wallace', in Burn, ed., *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, p. 86).

15 Kennedy and Polk, 'Looking for a Garde', p. 12.

16 Laura Miller, 'The Salon Interview: David Foster Wallace', in Burn, ed., *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, p. 62; the other modern philosophers that Wallace lists are Descartes, Kant, James, and Wittgenstein.

17 See Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays*, 2 vols., trans. E. F. J. Payne (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), vol. 2, p. 290.

18 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1969), vol. 1, p. 311 (hereafter cited as *WWR*).

19 See Ryerson, 'Introduction', pp. 17–18, for a brief account of Wallace's engagements with philosophy.

20 On the 'affinities' between the two thinkers, see Julian Young, 'Schopenhauer, Heidegger, Art, and the Will', in Dale Jacquette, ed., *Schopenhauer, Philosophy, and the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 162–80; see also Heidegger's claim that since 1818 Schopenhauer has 'most persistently determined the whole tone of all of nineteenth-and twentieth-century thought' (*What Is Called Thinking*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 39).

21 On Wallace's use of self-help books in his fiction, see Maria Bulstillos, 'Inside David Foster Wallace's Private Self-Help Library', *The Awl*, 5 April 2011 (www.theawl.com/2011/04/inside-david-foster-wallaces-private-self-help-library).

22 See *IJ* 98, 965, 1071–2. I understand from Professor Csikszentmihalyi that despite Wallace's interest in his work and their geographical proximity, the two never met (personal correspondence).

23 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Classic Work on How to Achieve Happiness* (London: Rider 2002), back-cover blurb. Wallace's copy, at the Harry Ransom Center, in Austin, Texas, is annotated by comments and by sidelinings and underlinings, mostly in red pen, on almost every page up to p. 77, where he seems to have stopped reading. Further references to this book are taken from Wallace's personal copy of *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991) at the Harry Ransom Center: Wallace's annotations are quoted from this volume by kind permission of the Harry Ransom Center.

24 Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, p. 1.

25 Ibid., p. 9.

26 Although Csikszentmihalyi refers to Schopenhauer in, for example, 'Positive Psychology and a Positive World-View: New Hope for the Future of Humankind', in Stewart I. Donaldson, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and Jeanne Nakamura, eds., *Applied Positive Psychology: Improving Everyday Life, Health, Schools, Work, and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 208, I take the debt to be more implicit and general than specific and direct.

27 Cskszentmihalyi, *Flow*, p. 31.

28 Ibid., p. 42. See also p. 52 (also underlined): 'Enjoyment appears at the boundary between boredom and anxiety'.

29 It is significant that Jonathan Franzen has linked Wallace's suicide specifically to boredom: 'in one interpretation of his suicide', Franzen speculates, 'David had died of boredom and in despair about his future novels'; 'If boredom is the soil in which the seeds of addiction sprout, and if the phenomenology and the teleology of suicidality are the same as those of addiction, it seems fair to say that David died of boredom' ('Farther Away', 82, 92).

30 Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), p. 118. The *Broom of the System* 'goes on a bit too long', he comments, 'as does most of Wallace's output' (p. 64).

31 On the relationship between the novel and boredom, see Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995): Spacks argues,'The invention of boredom as a concept and of the novel as genre coincided in time and implicated one another' (p. 60).

See Elizabeth S. Goodstein, *Experience without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), ch. 3, for a discussion of the prominence of boredom in nineteenth-century European culture. Two more recent studies that have informed this chapter are Peter Toohey, *Boredom: A Lively History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), and Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom*, trans. John Irons (London: Reaktion Books, 2005). In *The Pale King*, Wallace points out, through a dense philological passage on the idea of boredom that owes much to Reinhard Kuhn's *The Demon of Noontide: Ennui in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976) but that seems to be hallucinated by the character Lane Dean, that the word 'bore' only appeared in English 'suddenly' in 1766, 'just at the time of industry's rise . . . of mass man, the automated turbine and drill bit and bore' (*Pale King* 383–4).

32 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 14.

33 Monroe C. Beardsley, 'Aesthetic Value in Literature', *Comparative Literature Studies* 18 (1981), 240.

34 See Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom*, pp. 29–32, on boredom as a function of an overload or lack of meaning or information.

35 Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect' (1968), in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 141–8.

36 David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King: An Unfinished Novel* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011), pp. 69–70 (hereafter cited as *PK*).

37 'These subjects' sudden flashes of insight or awareness are structurally similar to but usually far more tedious and quotidian than the dramatically relevant foreknowledge we normally conceive as ESP or precognition' (*PK* 118).

38 See Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001): see especially pp. 104–10, on the 'ambiguous charm of institutional complexity' in Kafka (surely a precursor, even if a distant one, of Wallace's novel). Like Wallace's, Kafka's stories 'perform the anxiety and vertigo of a bureaucratic encounter, but they also enact its strange pleasure', according to Bennett (p. 106).

39 See *PK* 259: 'I am not Chris Fogle'.

40 See *PK* 106, where one unnamed employee's idea for a play is described: an IRS examiner sits working at a table, working longer and longer until everyone in the audience, outraged and bored by the play, has left – at which point the 'real action' of the play begins.

41 See Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (1975; London: Routledge, 2002), p. 306: 'one cannot, finally, be bored in good faith because boredom draws attention to particular aspects of the work (to certain modes of failure) and enables one to make the text interesting by inquiring how and why it bores'.

42 Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 26.

43 On Schopenhauer's concept of the 'saint', see, for example, Neil Jordan, *Schopenhauer's Ethics of Patience: Virtue, Salvation, and Value* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellon, 2010), ch. 5.

44 On 'self-shattering', see Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

EPILOGUE

1 Edouard Levé, *Suicide*, trans. Jan Steyn (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2011), pp. 13, 19. This sense of negative beauty is part of a long tradition that is directly articulated in, for example, Balzac's *The Wild Ass's Skin* (1831). In a novel that is largely impelled by the suicide of its protagonist Raphael de Valentin, Balzac has his romanticizing, ironizing narrator declare, 'Every suicide is a poem sublime in its melancholy': 'There is something grandiose and awe-inspiring about suicide', the narrator remarks (Honoré de Balzac, *The Wild Ass's Skin*, trans. Herbert J. Hunt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 29).

2 Paul Engelmann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein, with a Memoir*, trans. L. Furtmüller (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), p. 33 (letter of 21 June 1920). Wittgenstein should know: three of his four brothers committed (or probably committed) suicide, and in May 1820 he claimed that he had 'continually thought of taking my own life' (ibid.: see also pp. 23, 32).

3 Levé, *Suicide*, p. 29.

4 Jonathan Franzen, 'Farther Away: *Robinson Crusoe*, David Foster Wallace, and the Island of Solitude', *New Yorker* (April 18, 2011), 92–3. Much of Derrida's *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume II* is taken up by a tour-de-force reading of the themes of solitude, sovereignty, and suicidality in Defoe's novel: Derrida places *Robinson Crusoe* alongside Heidegger in an extended reading of the novel – organized in part around an argument concerning Crusoe's 'logic of automatic self-destruction' (Jacques Derrida's *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume II*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) p. 84).

5 Franzen, 'Farther Away', 91.

6 Karen Green, *Bough Down* (Los Angeles: Siglio, 2013), pp. 120, 145 (hereafter cited as *BD*).

7 Tim Adams, Interview with Karen Green, *The Observer* (10 April 2011) (www.theguardian.com/books/2011/apr/10/karen-green-david-foster-wallace-interview).

8 On these emerging traditions, see, for example, Sandra M. Gilbert, *Death's Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve* (New York: Norton, 2006), Amy-Katerini Prodromou, *Navigating Loss in Women's Contemporary Memoir* (London: Palgrave, 2015), and Tom Ratekin, *Final Acts: Traversing the Fantasy in the Modern Memoir* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009).

9 See Edwin S. Shneidman's comment: 'The person who commits suicide puts his psychological skeleton in the survivor's emotional closet – he sentences the survivor to a complex of negative feelings and, most importantly, to obsessing about the reasons for the suicide death' (*On the Nature of Suicide* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1969), p. 22).

10 Jill Bialosky, *History of a Suicide: My Sister's Unfinished Life* (London: Granta, 2015), p. 82; Peter Handke, *A Sorrow beyond Dreams*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: New York Review of Books, 2002), p. 6.

11 Tim Lott, *The Scent of Dried* Roses (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 8 (hereafter cited in the text as *SDR*).

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